ONE GUITAR By SAM MERWIN Jr.

fantastic ADVENTURES

tire countryside fled from

IE SPECTRE OF
UICIDE SWAMP

By E. K. JARVIS

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MEN BEHIND fantastic ADVENTURES

Lee Francis

Author of "Spectre of Suicide Swamp"

MY beginning as a writer was similar to that of Richard S. Shaver. We both used a turret lathe. Somebody talked to Shaver through his lathe, but I used mine to hide a copy of *AMAZING STORIES* when I was supposed to be working in a war plant.

The stories looked easy to write. I tried doing one. I took my effort to Howard Browne and he bought it. How long, I wondered, had this been going on? I wrote another story. I took it to Howard Browne. He didn't buy it. Nor the next. Nor the next. NOR the next.

I had been sneering at the turret lathe. Suddenly, it began to look better to me.

The mistake I made, I believe, was when I stopped reading science fiction. When I started reading again, the feel of it seemed to come back, because the next story sold. It was quite a while, however, before the checks got me out of the factory—a long time after the war was over.

I married a Chicago girl. After my wife's death in Dallas two years later I left Texas and lived in five different parts of the country, landing finally in a suburb just outside of New York

(*Continued on third cover*)

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

ONE GLANCE at this month's cover proofs when they were received from the printer, and we found ourselves in the midst of a mystery that would have the private dicks like Phillip Marlowe and Paul Pine gnashing their finger nails. The mystery of one too many authors. If the front cover listing E.K. Jarvis as the author of "The Spectre of Suicide Swamp" was correct, what was the name Lee Francis doing on the second cover as author of the same novel? Particularly when the photograph identified as Lee Francis was of Elliott Jarvis?

A RUSH CALL to our printer—and the puzzle was solved. In setting the type for the second cover, the typesetter—a Lee Francis fan who'd just finished reading "The Soul Snatchers"—had gone to the wrong files and picked up the wrong slug of type. By the time we'd called, most of the covers had already been printed with the Lee Francis name. We were able to correct the last run—but if you have one of the first copies, remember that E.K. Jarvis wrote this month's lead story, not Lee Francis.

THE LATEST atomic experiments held several days ago at the Yucca Flat proving grounds was, if we're to judge by the newspaper accounts of it, a trifle disappointing. The explosion lacked the usual brilliant flash which always preceded earlier detonations, and appeared as just a tremendous fireball.

THE ENTIRE thing was televised—and to us watching it in the safety of our living room, it appeared a most ineffectual weapon for all the dire prophecies made about it. Surrounded as we were by all the comforts of a civilized existence, it seemed incredible that with the burst of this cloudy fireball, entire peoples would be wiped off the face of the earth. It seemed impossible that this vague cloud has, for the last seven years, held us in a vise of fear and distrust.

AN INSTANT after the detonation, the cloud broke in two. Then the twin tails joined together and formed a giant ring. Around 15,000 feet the ring massed together and hung there. And we watched it. It seemed to hang in the sky—ominously, threateningly—for seconds—and then a slight breeze blowing eastward picked up the cloud formation and slowly dissipated it toward the desert.

AND SUDDENLY we weren't so comfortable any more—nor so cheerful....

TODAY THE Ziff-Davis Fiction Group welcomes into its fold a new editor. A writer who has proved himself to be one of the most popular in science-fiction and fantasy, as well as in other fields of writing—an editor who's as good as any in the business. We're proud to be able to add Paul W. Fairman to our staff. We're sure that his ideas and talents will be well incorporated in the ZD fiction magazines.

THE RESPONSE to our new magazine FANTASTIC was not only gratifying, it was overwhelming. Never in our wildest dreams did we contemplate the almost complete sell-out achieved by this first issue! And the comments we have received, in letters and phone calls and personally, have been almost unanimous in their unstinted praise.

That's as it should be! .....LES

THE END

"That rocket gun kicks like a mule, huh, Pop?"

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"It's just the old lamplighter," Duke comforted her, "sewing up the sky for an extra job."

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SUICIDE SWAMP

By E. K. Jarvis

It may have been just a "B" movie with a corny plot. But Duke Harley remembered that a good actor always lives his part

HARLEY HAD about given up hope for the day when the phone rang. He picked it up. "Duke Harley speaking." He was careful to keep a superior, *prosperous* tone in his voice.

"Hello, Duke. This is Marty French."

"Oh...Marty." The tone became cordial as hope welled up. Marty French was casting director at Epic. Casting directors were God's chosen people. They gave you a job sometimes, and when you had a job you could eat.

"You working?"

Duke glanced at the frayed cuff of his dressing gown. He laughed with just the right note of amusement. "I'm getting a little rest, thank heav-

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en. Turned down some eastern video appearances. Too tired. I'm starting a western at Tri-Art next month."

The sound over the phone might have been a sigh. "Oh.... Well, I figured you wouldn't be interested, but I thought I'd call."

"Interested in what?"

"We're doing a quickie to cash in on this science-fiction boom. The script's all ready. Five weeks at seven-fifty per. Didn't think you'd be interested."

Duke continued to study his frayed cuff. Now he switched his attention to the other cuff. It was frayed too. He said, "Let's cut out the crap now, huh? That western at Tri-Art is the same one every out-of-work actor has been starting for the past ten years. It never gets made. I want that job and you goddam well know I do. When do I start?"

"We begin shooting Thursday."

"How about a hundred bucks' advance? I'm bust."

"Okay. I'll send it over."

"Who's the sex interest?"

"Kathie Dawn."

"Okay. I need the job so bad I can even put up with her."

"Come down tomorrow and sign the contract."

"Will do. So long."

Duke hung up, realizing he'd committed the cardinal sin of filmdom: he'd dropped his front. No matter how bad off you were in Hollywood, you were always working or resting between pictures. You were never out of a job and you always took a job as a favor to the producer. You were never hungry and you were always hard to get.

Duke had broken the rule—dropped his front—and he didn't care. What the hell! You couldn't be a phony all your life. You had to tell the truth at least once a year, or you got so you didn't know the difference between the truth and the lie.

Duke banged a cigarette viciously against his thumbnail and thought of Kathie Dawn. She's evidently come down a long way—just as had he himself—to take five weeks in a quickie. He blew out a cloud of smoke and grinned at it. A hard dame, Kathie, but you had to give her credit. She'd never bought a part the easy way.

ACTING ON sudden impulse Duke picked up the phone, dialed a number, thinking as he did so that it might be the wrong one. It probably *was* the wrong one with Kathie taking a grade-B assignment. Kathie wouldn't live there any more.

"Park Royal."

"Is Miss Kathie Dawn in?"

"Just a moment. I will connect you."

Kathie was still keeping up the front. Duke waited.

"Hello—Miss Dawn's suite."

"Hello Kathie. Duke Harley."

"Oh, Duke." The voice sounded more natural. "You were lucky to catch me. I was just—"

"I know—headed for Ciro's. Look—I understand you signed with Epic for a—"

She wouldn't let him say it. Her laugh was silvery. "For some reason, I've never been able to turn Marty down. He's such a dear."

"Oh—doing him a favor, huh?"

"Yes—a favor." Something in her tone dared Duke to imply it was anything else. Duke said, "I'm doing the lead in the same stinker, hon. But they're doing me the favor."

"Why—Duke!" Kathie's surprise was sincere. "Do you mean—?"

"I mean I decided to be honest about it. First time in years, and it's such a novel feeling I had to have more. Look—I've got ten bucks to

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my name and I'll shoot in on dinner. Not at Ciro's, though."

"Well—I have a date, but—"

"Like hell you have. Listen—do you want a five-buck steak or don't you?"

A pause—then another change in tone. "I'm drooling."

Duke laughed. "Twenty minutes."

KATHIE DAWN sopped up the last of her gravy with a piece of bread. "They're calling it *The Spectre of Suicide Swamp*.

Duke shuddered. "Oh, good lord, no! If Marty had told me that—"

"It's all about a robot out in a swamp."

"Location?"

"No. They've got a set from an old horror picture they never tore down.

Duke held out a pack of cigarettes. "Kathie, there's a reason I don't care if anybody knows I'm broke or not."

Kathie took a cigarette and questioned with her beautiful eyes.

"I'm quitting pictures."

"Duke!"

"I'm fed up. I'm sick of all the shallow, phony pretense. Besides, I'm starving to death."

"But what are you going to do?"

"I think maybe I'll open a gas station."

"You're kidding!"

"Why do you say that? There's a living in a good gas station. Some money every day."

"You're insane."

"Uh-huh. Five years ago I made ten thousand a week. I was a kid then. I didn't know what to do with it. Now I'm washed up and still this side of thirty. I'm looking forward to five weeks of seven-fifty. That's a lot of money. It'll buy me a nice gas station."

"You're just feeling low, Duke. You'll get over it."

"Kathie—after this picture, why don't we get married? We can have a lunch room with the gas station. We'd do all right."

She whitened under her rouge. Duke thought she was going to slap him. She got up from the table. "Thanks for the dinner. I'll see you on the set."

Kathie left. Duke stared into his coffee cup. "Oh, well," he muttered. "It was a silly idea anyway."

THE SET was an old one Epic had used for scenes from *Swamp Angel*. It had lain idle too long to suit Joe Parker, Epic's president. It covered about ten acres and was, Duke thought, as full of phony atmosphere and horror as any other section of this phony movie lot in the phony town called Hollywood.

Duke got down early Thursday morning and found an assistant director, Pete Cooper, waiting for the cast. Pete Cooper did most of Sam Corwin's worrying for him. Sam was a big director. He was so big he could afford to do a stinker like *The Spectre of Suicide Swamp* once in a while. And he was big enough to rate a first-class worrier like Pete.

Pete said, "Good morning, Mr. Harley. Are you familiar with the story we're going to shoot?"

"The hell with the story. I know my part."

Pete was hurt. "That's not the right attitude, Mr. Harley. How do you expect to do your best if you haven't got the story line?"

"I'm getting seven-fifty a week. That's how good I'm going to be. Right to the penny. Then I'm going to open a gas station."

Pete smiled. "You're a great kidder, Mr. Harley. Let me brief you on the story. It's about a robot built by a scientist in a big city. Four hoodlums steal the robot. They use it to smash in the brick wall of a loan company and carry away the safe."

"They put the robot and the safe in

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a six-wheel trailer truck and head south," Duke said. "They kill off a few of each other and sink the truck in four hundred and eighty feet of quicksand. Then the robot wanders off into the swamp. The gentle swamp folk take one look and go nuts."

Pete was a little hurt. "Oh, you do know the story."

"Uh-huh. A minor classic. They should call it *Gone With The Slight Breeze.* Good morning, Kathie."

Kathie came over and sat down in Sam Corwin's chair. She'd already been to makeup. She wore a pair of ballet slippers over bare feet and a plain ragged dress. It just happened to reveal every lucious line of her body.

Pete Cooper wore a worried look. He was hoping Kathie would get out of Corwin's chair before the director showed up. Kathie shivered and rubbed the goose flesh on her arms. "Talk about realism! I haven't got a blessed stitch on under this thing. No room."

Duke took off his coat and handed it to her. It was ragged too, but it helped. Duke said, "You'd look nice in a dress like that—in our lunchroom next to the gas station."

"I thought maybe you'd recaptured your sanity. I guess not." She glanced out over the dismal prop-swamp. I hope that water's warm in there—and no snakes."

"We have four cottonmouths," Pete said. "They're caged up when we aren't using them."

Kathie shuddered again, but for a different reason. "I wish they'd cut that scene where I get bit."

"Oh, we couldn't do that. It's one of the high points of drama," Pete assured her.

Duke eyed Kathie critically. "Let's get a cup of coffee—unless you're afraid it'll show under that dress."

DUKE'S first scene with Kathie came at ten o'clock. It was the scene where Duke, passing by sheerest happenstance through the thickest and most impenetrable part of Suicide Swamp, came upon Kathie taking a swim. An alligator also happened by at that moment and craved Kathie for dinner. It was Duke's job to prevent this, and thus strike up an acquaintance with the swamp girl. A good scene.

All would have gone well, but the alligator they'd rented was well into its late hundreds and not interested in dinner. It had been too well fed. Its owner used a goad on its soft underbelly, but by the time he had the reptile functioning, Sam Corwin had become interested in dinner himself.

"An hour for lunch!" Pete Cooper screamed, and everybody went tearing out of the jungle toward the cafeteria, leaving Kathie waist-deep in water.

"Hey—help me out of this—somebody!"

The arms that reached for her belonged to Duke Harley. Duke said, "Baby, can't you see the writing on the wall? When they all run out and leave you standing in the swamp, you're about washed up. Now, that gas station I have in mind. . . ."

Kathie's eyes blazed fire. "Damn you, Duke." She raked a set of nails at his face—missed—fell back in the water. Again Duke reached down and fished her out. He was laughing. He lifted her, his hands against the curves of her back.

Kathie, anchored there—her feet against the bank, her body arched out over the water, resting against his hands.

And, to Duke, it was very strange—indescribable—except to call it a moment between heaven and earth. Only a moment, surely, but yet a lifetime. The passing of lazy clouds over a blue sky. Slowly. Long years in a

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moment? Or a moment in long years?

Duke couldn't be sure, but he remembered pondering upon the subject—on that and many other things, with the warm flesh under his hands, the ripple of muscles under his fingers.

And it was within him to know that Kathie was also bemused; that Kathie, too, pondered many deep problems. Like—does a queen bee dress for dinner? And, where do the warm breezes go in wintertime?

"PUT ME down."

Duke lowered his eyes to gaze dully into Kathie's face. Slowly, very slowly, it dawned on him that he had lifted her up from the water and was holding her in his arms like a child.

"Put me down." Not peremptorily, but with a sense of wonder.

"Oh, sure—sure."

He set her down carefully on her bare feet. Her eyes held his, afraid to turn elsewhere. She asked, "What were you looking at?"

"The sound boom."

"Where?"

"Overhead—where it always is."

"Is it there?"

"No. It's gone. That's why I was looking. It seems so damn silly that they'd take the soundboom to lunch with them."

"They wouldn't do that."

"No. Nor the cameras. You don't go to lunch with cameras. But they're gone too."

Kathie came close and leaned against him. She put her face on his chest and closed her eyes. "Duke—it's different. It's all—different.

"How can you tell? You aren't looking."

"I can tell. It's a feeling—it's how I felt and what I was thinking about when you pulled me out of the water. It took so long. I had a wild, crazy thought."

"What thought did you have, Kathie?"

"It was so silly, I'm ashamed to say."

"What thought?"

"An old man bent and twisted. He came hobbling over with a needle and thread in his hand. He sewed up a hole in the sky." Kathie pushed hard on his chest. *"Duke. I'm going mad!"*

"No, angel. I saw him too. It was the old lamplighter doing some extra work to earn a few pennies."

"Duke! Duke! For God's sake!"

"Take it easy, angel."

"It's all changed, Duke—all changed." Kathie's nails were biting into the flesh of his arms. Her teeth were set and he knew her lower lip was between them. He knew if he didn't do something about it, pretty soon there'd be blood.

He pushed her back and slapped her face.

Her eyes spat fire. She said, "Damn you!" But she wasn't tense any more.

Duke said, "Sit down—there—on that log."

Kathie sat down and Duke dropped beside her. There was the passing of time. Silence. Kathie said, "Why are we sitting here?"

"I don't know. It just seems the thing to do. We've got to say things. There are things waiting to be said. Let's get them over with."

"What things?"

"Things like this isn't a movie set. This is a swamp. That alligator over there wasn't leased for the day. And we aren't actors. Somebody pulled the plug. We went down the drain."

"Duke—who are we? Where are we?"

"That's what doesn't seem right. If we were somebody else we should know it."

"I'm not anybody else—I'm *me*. Me! Do you understand?"

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DUKE WAS staring pensively at the dark water below the bank on which they sat.

"Duke—where *are* we?"

"In a swamp, baby."

"That's no answer."

"It's the best one I've got at the moment. Listen— I've got another hunch. I think we belong here—at least, the people we've become belong here. Is that too tough to follow?"

"No—no I guess not. But what makes you so sure we're two other people? If this had to happen, couldn't it just happen to us?"

"I don't think so. I don't think people are dropped through holes in the sky for no reason at all."

"That old man—"

"Skip it—forget him. He was nothing but a rationalization."

"What's that?"

"Something entirely different from what it appears to be. You see it the way you do because it has to be put into some form you're familiar with or your mind can't grasp it."

"I'm not grasping anything."

"Your subconscious is, but quit arguing with me. I was saying that we couldn't just be dropped here willy-nilly. There had to be two places for us to fill. Otherwise there wouldn't have been room."

"What happened to the people who occupied this space before we came along?"

Duke got abruptly to his feet. "How the hell do I know? Come on. Let's start walking. I think when we come to the place we're supposed to go we'll recognize it."

Duke took a step—stopped. Kathie was looking down. Duke asked, "What's wrong?"

"My dress—it's wet. And there's still nothing under it."

"Interesting," Duke said. "I'll file the information away. Come on."

THE PATH was narrow and thickly overgrown with grass. It wound through trees thick-trunked, and heavy with dank moss.

They walked and walked and it seemed there was no way out. Nothing but a path that turned and twisted through a swamp; a swamp not sad and melancholy by Hollywood design, but because it had grown that way.

"Be careful," Duke said. "The snakes in this place don't come in boxes. And they haven't had their teeth pulled."

Kathie stopped, stood rigid, staring up at Duke.

"What's the matter, baby?" He knew even as he asked. He could sense the hysteria bubbling up.

"Duke—it's not real. It doesn't matter what we do. You're not here. This isn't here. It's not real. I'm all alone in a dream!"

He took her by the shoulders and shook her roughly. "Baby! Get that foolishness out of your mind. This *is* real! You're flesh and blood and you can get hurt. Remember that! You can bloat all up if a snake bites you. You can die, baby! Snap out of it!"

Duke had help in snapping her out of it. This help came from the biggest man he had ever seen. A huge man with a flowing white beard and piercing eyes who could move through the swampland like a shadow. He appeared, as from nowhere, to skewer them with piercing eyes. "You two been out in the swamp alone?"

He thundered the last word, and the impact of his voice stunned them. Duke said, "We've been—"

"*Silence!*" The giant raised an arm like an angry Moses. "I—the new redeemer—have given the law! Thou shalt not commit adultery! You have disobeyed."

"Who—who said anything about adultery?" Two facts stood out starkly in Duke's mind First, his reaction

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to this reeking character actor should have been strictly from a belly laugh. He'd never seen anything so rank as this in all his Hollywood days. But he didn't laugh and he was scared stiff. This giant was dangerous—a madman—and life and death could hang in the balance.

The second fact, dormant in his mind: there were two others here before us. Maybe we're like them, but not exact duplications. Yet, we're accepted as the other two. Is that how it will be: all eyes blinded to our differences?

"The tasting of the fleshpots is an abomination of the Lord! Down on your knees before I smite both of you to earth!"

He's just the guy who can do it too, Duke thought, and pulled Kathie down until the giant towered over them. Kathie was trembling. Duke could feel the terror within her. He whispered, "Take it easy, baby—easy."

"Pray now! Pray that you escape the boiling fires of hell!"

"We repent our sins," Duke croaked.

"But we didn't sin—"

The duke squeezed Kathie's hand to cut off the words. His head was lowered. He whispered, "Sure we did—don't disappoint this guy. He'll crack our skulls like eggs. *Say it!*"

"We repent our—sins."

Duke took a chance and raised his eyes. The giant stood staring up at the sky with arms flung wide. He bellowed, "Are the lives of these sinners forfeit, oh Lord? Give thy servant a sign: I would do thy will!"

"Duke," Kathie whispered. "He's—he's crazy!"

"Sure he's crazy. Why do you think we're kneeling here in the mud? This guy's a killer!"

The giant was saying, "Oh Lord—give me a sign. Are the lives of Ginny Hays and Tom Lewit forfeit in thy sight? Give thy servant a sign—a sign! I am thy vengeance, oh—"

GINNY HAYS giggled. "Tom—stop it. You stop it now!"

Tom Lewit took his hand away. He was somewhat confused. "But Ginny...you came out here with me. What for'd you come here if—?"

The girl sobered. "We shouldn't have, Tom. What if the Prophet found out? What if he followed us?"

"Don't worry about him, honey. He's—"

Ginny sat waiting for Tom's hands to come back. Having sent them away, she could hardly invite them. She could only wait. "Tom, there's some that say he's crazy. What do you think? Is he really a prophet like he says?"

"I don't know. He's sure a glory-be-to-God fire eater. The way he whips them up at the prayer meetings—"

"I'm—I'm afraid of him."

"Who isn't?"

"When Laura Pritchard and Joe Davis disappeared—do you believe what the Prophet said about it?"

"What does it matter? Their folks must have. Nobody made any complaints. He's put the fear of the Lord into everybody—that's for sure!"

Ginny smiled dreamily. "Tom—we ain't got much time—"

That should have helped, but it didn't. Tom said, "Ginny—"

"What?"

"That thing—that thing up there. Where'd it come from?"

"I don't know. I never saw it before. It wasn't here when we—"

"Ginny! Something's wrong. Look at those other things—those boxes with—with eyes like. They weren't there before either."

Ginny had suddenly changed. She was no longer the languorous female

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preoccupied with the biological urge. Her eyes were bright, sharp, intense. She gripped Tom Lewit's wrist. "Tom—I know what those things are! Movie cameras! Remember when they had the picture show at Bate's Landing? The pictures they had of famous people getting off that ship and men with cameras were there? These are almost the same."

"But where'd they come from? Ginny—we'd better get out of here!"

"Sit still. Let me think! Something's happened."

"You sure ain't fooling about that. I got a feeling—"

"Be quiet! Tom—you know what this is? Where we are?"

"Why, sure—we're in Suicide Swamp on the bank of the—"

"*We're not.* We're on a movie set. It told all about movie sets in those magazines at the landing store!"

"But that don't make sense. How'd they get here without us hearing them?"

"They didn't come to us. We went to them." Ginny's eyes were sparkling. "Listen, Tom. I don't understand any of this, but I've got a feeling about it. You know how I always wanted to get out of the swamps—wanted to get where I could *be* somebody? Well, maybe wishes are prayers. And even the Prophet says prayers are answered. You just keep your mouth shut and let me do the talking."

"BUT GINNY—that's silly. If we're some place else, the people will know it no matter how we got here. We just won't belong. We're swamp folks!"

"I think maybe we will belong. I—I've got some instincts about all this. I think we took somebody else's place. Otherwise there wouldn't be room for us—"

"You mean the people that were here got out of our way—or died or something?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. Just keep—somebody's *coming.*"

A dozen technicians showed up, all wearing toothpicks in their mouths. Pete Cooper came down the walk. "What's the matter? Didn't you two eat?"

Tom gaped. Ginny smiled. "No, we were—were—"

But Pete interrupted, staring at Tom: "Gosh—you're sure going all out on this part, aren't you?"

"Huh?"

"I said you're sure absorbing your role. Man, you really got hold of the mood!"

Tom turned his head to gaze at Ginny. She smiled and chucked him under the chin. It appeared to be a gesture of endearment. It served another purpose, however, when she pushed his lower jaw up and closed his mouth.

"That's what we've been doing," Ginny said. "Getting the mood."

Pete threw away his toothpick and yelled, "Everybody on set! Everybody on set!"

Things moved in kaleidoscopic fashion for Tom and Ginny after that. Sam Corwin strode up and took his chair. He consulted with his subordinates. Then everybody sat back while the alligator was brought back.

TOM STARED at the reptile with unbelieving eyes. He whispered, "Glory be! That old 'gater's ready for the soft mud. He couldn't bite his way out of a thick fog!"

"Quiet," Ginny hissed. "Follow my lead."

"Where we going?"

"Shut *up!*"

"Scene Seven—Take Four," Pete Cooper yelled, and faded back into the swamp while Corwin took over.

"This will be a take," Corwin bel-

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lowed. "Places please. Mr. Harley—Miss Dawn."

Tom looked around. "They must be waiting for somebody."

"That's us, stupid," Ginny hissed.

"Then what are we supposed to do?"

Pete Cooper materialized. "Duke—Kathie. Look alive. That's Mr. Corwin talking."

Ginny got slowly to her feet. "Your name is Duke Harley. Remember it," she whispered.

"Sure, but . . ." Tom stopped speaking to watch open-mouthed as Ginny passed a hand over her forehead and collapsed gently to the ground.

Pete Cooper rushed over, pushed the staring Tom out of the way. "What's wrong with you, Duke? She faints and you let her lie."

"Faint? That's silly. She's strong as a horse."

Pete, half bent over, did a double-take. "Duke, you're letting your role go to your head."

Pete picked Ginny up and started off the set. Tom trotted along behind. "Where you taking her?"

"To first-aid. Where else?"

"Okay—I'll just come along."

Ginny came to just outside the first-aid room and handled the situation beautifully. "I'm sorry—awfully sorry. I can't work anymore today."

Pete Cooper put her down gently, regretfully. "Sure, Kathie. You feeling a little better, though?"

"Yes. Please take me to my dressing room."

With alacrity, Pete picked her up again and started across the lot. Tom again took up the rear. Pete turned. "I can handle it, Duke."

Tom stopped and watched the two of them disappear around a corner. He looked about dolefully. He was definitely not happy.

GINNY reappeared from around the corner half an hour later. Tom gasped anew, and with good reason. Ginny was dressed in apparel the like of which he'd seen only in pictures. Maybe Ginny had been backward, but she'd sure learned fast. There were stars in her eyes as she asked, "Like it?"

"I—I guess so."

"There's things under this," she said demurely, then frowned at Tom. "Why aren't you dressed?"

"Me? I'm dressed. I ain't got any clothes but these, Ginny—and a Sunday shirt back home."

Ginny pointed. "Over there, stupid. That little house on skids, with your name on the door. It's your dressing room."

Tom peered. "That ain't my name."

"It is too. And stop saying *ain't*. Your name is Duke Harley."

"Oh sure, I remember. You think it's all right to go in there?"

"Of course. You'll find clothes in there." She turned to eye him critically. "You *can* dress yourself, can't you?"

"Oh sure—sure. But—"

"Go on! Stop arguing."

Tom went into Duke Harley's dressing room and, fortunately, was not bewildered by any great array of clothing. There was just enough to clothe one man and no more. Tom put everything on, and in so doing he encountered another piece of luck. Duke had worn a sport shirt that morning, so there was no necktie to bewilder the swamp boy.

When he came out he found Ginny waiting for him. "I found out where you live!" she said triumphantly.

"You did? I was wondering about that. How'd you find out?"

"From that funny little man with the big hands that carried me over

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here. You live in the Sudbury apartments."

"Where's that?"

"On Wilshire Boulevard."

"Where's Wilshire Boulevard?"

"We'll take a taxi. The man will know."

"They charge for that, don't they?"

"Of course. Haven't you got any money?"

"I don't know."

Tom dug into his pockets and came up with a sparse handful of green bills. "Some, I guess."

"And there's some in my handbag."

"Your handbag?"

"Kathie Dawn's handbag—but it's mine now. Can't you get that through your head? What was theirs is now ours. Try to remember that."

"Sure—sure. I'll remember."

"Come on, let's hurry."

Tom came along, a step behind. "Why are you in such a sweat to get to Duke's—to my place?"

"There's a reason—an important one. Stop lagging behind."

TOM TOOK the dime the cab driver handed back. Tom said, "Thank you kindly," and put the dime into his pocket. The cab pulled away with a snort of tires. Tom and Ginny went into the Sudbury apartments.

Tom found a key to open the door of the shabby one-room walkup. He followed Ginny inside, stood looking about. "Sure a pretty place," he conceded.

Ginny was paying no attention. Her sharp eyes caught what she was looking for on the bed table. She went over and picked it up triumphantly. "This is it! Glory be! We found it."

"Found what?"

"The story! The parts we have to play in the movie they're making." She frowned at him. "Say—why do you think I fainted when I did?"

"I don't know. It seemed kind of funny. Didn't figure you was the kind that's plagued with the vapors."

"It was because we didn't know what we were supposed to do. It was the only way out. Now we've got the parts it'll be different. We'll study them—memorize them—"

Tom stared at the thick sheaf in her hand. "You mean we read that stuff and then remember it. Ginny! It'd take a lifetime."

"It's got to be done by morning."

"*Morning*. Good Lord. When night comes we got to sleep. You know that!"

"No sleep tonight. We're going to work."

Tom had all the appearances of a reprimanded dog. "Ginny—I don't like this. Let's go home."

Ginny slipped an arm around his neck and smiled up at him. "Darling, you *are* home. Duke, dear. This is your home."

Tom felt her fingers exploring the back of his neck. "The Prophet wouldn't like this," he muttered.

"But the Prophet isn't here, darling."

"How do we know?" Tom replied gloomily. "Maybe he can come the same way we did."

"Tom, forget the Prophet. You're going to be a great movie star. All you have to do is learn the part."

Misery shone from his eyes as he looked down at her. "You want me to do it, Ginny?"

"Yes. You know I do. This is our big opportunity. Our chance!"

"But—but what if the guy that owns these pants comes back? And the woman who belongs in that dress."

"I belong in this dress. Will you try to learn the part?"

Tom sighed. "I'll try. But some way I see trouble ahead. I ain't no actor, Ginny."

"You don't have to be. Just learn

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the part, darling. Then all you have to do is be yourself."

THE GIANT with the white beard lowered his head. "God in his mercy has spared your lives," he rumbled.

Duke raised his head. "Can we get up now?"

"Go to your homes. Never let me find you alone out here again." He lowered his great arms and stepped aside. Duke helped Kathie up and urged her along the path. When they were out of earshot, he said, "Who do you suppose that character was?"

Kathie clung tightly to his hand. "Duke—I'm scared. Let's get out of this place. Let's find a road and a bus and then a train. I don't like this country."

"He said to go to our homes. I wonder where they are?"

"Duke! Did you hear me?"

"I heard you. You want to leave this country. But it isn't as simple as that."

"Why not?"

"Because we don't know where we are. Where *is* this country? How do we get out of it? Besides, we aren't ourselves any more. We're two other people. You heard what he called us. Ginny Hays and Tom Lewit. We've got to find out where we live."

The path widened now and they came into what was evidently a settlement. There were a dozen or so weary, decrepit shacks and cabins. A teetering wharf beyond them nosing out into the black, still waters of a river.

"Maybe this is it," Duke said.

Evidently it was. A shapeless slattern appeared in one of the doorways to shrill, "Ginny! Ginny Hays—you get into this house this minute. I got something to say to you."

"That must be your mother," Duke whispered.

"Oh—God forbid! Duke, she's . . ."

"You'd better do as she says. Go ahead. I'll see you later."

"No! If I go, you come with me."

"I'll walk part way. Buck up! Don't look so scared."

Duke went most of the way. Far enough to meet the slattern who lumbered out into what passed as a street and took Kathie by the ear, but addressed her remarks to Duke. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Tom Lewit! Leading my little girl out into the swamp! Your pa ought to tan your hide."

A HALF DOZEN urchins had materialized to form a visible audience. Duke felt the eyes of a larger, invisible audience from the windows and doorways of the hovels.

One of the urchins bleated, "I saw 'em, Mizz Hays. I was a watchin'. They met the Prophet!"

Mrs. Hays paled and almost lost her grip on Ginny's ear. "Met the Prophet?"

"Yes," Kathie moaned. "He said it was all right."

Duke thought he saw relief in the renewed energy with which Mrs. Hays swung Ginny around and pointed her at the house. "Then you can be thankful for his mercy," the shapeless woman screamed. "Now, into that house with you."

The urchins were grinning. The half-pint spy chuckled with glee. "Ginny's going to get tanned good."

Duke looked down at the dirty face, viewed it with marked distaste. This was the kind of a child one would enjoy whaling regularly. The child grinned at Duke. "And you better come home. Pa's waitin' for you."

Oh, no! Duke moaned inwardly. Not the kid brother! "All right," he said aloud. "You lead the way."

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Junior complied with obvious relish—a relish borne, no doubt, of anticipation. He moved up the street with Duke in his wake, and turned left around the end of the settlement. As they entered a thick grove, Duke heard a wail of anguish from the direction of the houses behind him. The voice belonged to Kathie.

Duke felt a little sorry for her, but not much. Maybe a spanking would do Kathie good. Duke almost smiled. If she'd had more of them earlier in life...

Another clearing opened before him. In its center was a house, somewhat larger than those in the settlement proper, but just as beaten and tumbledown.

And now Duke stopped short as the house erupted humanity. Out they came, large and small; from toddlers of two and three up to young men and women of both sexes in at least their early twenties. Duke began counting swiftly. He got to fourteen and gave up. "In heaven's name—what will pa and ma look like?" he muttered.

He was soon enlightened on this point. A heavy-faced, beetle-browed man strode out scowling. He was followed by a thin wisp of a woman with a baby in her arms. "Now, Pa," the woman said, "don't lose your temper."

The scowling man strode out to meet Duke; stopped and stood spread-legged, his scowl deepening. "Where you been?"

The whole family waited in dead silence to hear.

"Why—why, out in the swamp."

"With that sheep-eyed Hays gal?"

"We were—"

The man's fist came up and around, to catch Duke flush on the mouth.

The woman cried, "Pa! Your temper! Don't lose your temper now!"

THE ADVICE came a little late, Duke thought, as he lay on the ground looking up into the moss-laden trees.

"Get to your feet!"

"Why? So you can knock me down again?"

"None of your lip! What's this I hear about you meeting the Prophet?"

"We met him. He got us a fast trial and an acquittal."

The man frowned. Duke had been trying to judge his age. His hair was streaked with gray. There were deep lines in his face, but no softness in his muscle. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not sure myself."

The man stood undecided. His words held further threat. "If you got us in bad with the Prophet—" He turned away suddenly. "Go in and eat your supper."

The man strode around the house and out of sight. Duke stood rubbing his jaw, looking over his new relatives. All brothers and sisters, he supposed, even though it seemed incredible. He wondered if children ever struck out for themselves in this weird country.

"Come in and eat your supper, son," the woman said. "It's getting cold." Duke grinned. That, at least, sounded sane and wholesome. It was what mothers said the world over.

He found a dim, crude room inside with a dirt floor and a long table down the middle. There was a fireplace at one end. Bunks ran along two walls. A ladder led to a loft above.

The fun having terminated, the family went about its business and left Duke pretty much alone. The food tasted good. He was hungry enough to overlook the greasiness of the meat and the sogginess of the bread. Covertly, Duke studied the members of the family. He wondered

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what their names were, where confidences should be attempted. He wondered also how Kathie was faring. Had she been sent to bed without her supper? This amused him at first. Then the absurdity of the whole thing struck him. Kathie had been right. They should get out of this horrible country. What were they doing here in the first place, anyhow?

CONTEMPLATION on this point sobered him. What *were* they doing there? By what freak accident in time or space had they been transplanted so suddenly from one environment to another? And whose places had they taken?

Duke chewed on a piece of salt pork and put this single item under the mental microscope. Why did his mind keep repeating that idea? How did he know they had replaced anyone? Maybe they hadn't.

But obviously they had. They'd walked into this strange world, had been taken by the ear, spanked, and knocked down with an unmistakable show of familiarity.

"You shouldn't anger your father, Tom. You know his temper."

Duke started, turned, and found the woman seated beside him, the baby lying, contented, over her shoulder. His heart suddenly warmed. She handled the baby as naturally as she breathed. She would always be handling one. She would probably leave a baby crying when she died.

"No—I guess I shouldn't."

"He isn't as hard as he seems. It's just that everybody's afraid since Laura Pritchard and Joe Davis disappeared."

Duke could remain silent no longer. He had to pry for an opening somewhere. This seemed as safe a place as any. "Ma—what happened to them? That is—what do you think happened?"

A strange, blank look came into her tired blue eyes. "It must be like the Prophet said. The Lord smote them down because they sinned."

"Ma—do you really believe that guff?"

Her eyes cleared, widened. "Tom! I don't understand! What are you saying?"

"After all, why do you—we, take the Prophet's word for everything? He's only another man."

The woman glanced quickly around as though she feared her other children had overheard this heresy. "Tom! You don't mean that—any of it! The Prophet has brought us close to God. He's made us realize the horror of sin." Again she glanced around while the infant on her shoulder cooed happily. She lowered her voice. "And he controls The Beast. Don't forget that. He controls the instrument of God's vengeance."

Duke beat down the next logical question. But it wouldn't stay down. He sought the most innocent method of framing it. "Ma—do you think anybody ever really saw The Beast?"

"You know they did, Tom. When the beast went to Carter's place that night and tore it down, as a warning. The Carters saw The Beast when God's mercy let them escape with their lives. You heard them tell it in church. And a half dozen other people saw it walking through the swamp with its red eyes blazing!"

"But how do we know The Prophet controlled it?"

The woman turned worried eyes on him. "Tom—what's got into you? Do you want to bring God's vengeance down on all of us?"

"No, Ma. I guess I'm just upset. Think I'll take a walk and then go to bed."

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DUKE FOUND relief in the darkness of the night outside. Night, it seemed, came quickly in this swamp country. He made his way toward the light of the settlement, was startled by the soft footsteps that came close.

"It's me, Franky."

Duke knew the voice. It was that of the urchin he'd have liked most to wallop. One of his many brothers.

"What do you want?"

"Looking for to see Ginny?"

"Maybe."

Franky giggled. "It still costs a penny."

Evidently there was a working arrangement here. Duke wondered if he had a penny. He dug into his pocket and found what felt to be several. He wondered how his predecessor had managed to acquire such wealth in this God-forsaken mire. "All right. There's the money."

"Wait here."

The light footsteps faded. Duke leaned against the dim bole of a tree; slapped a couple of mosquitoes; wished he were back in Hollywood. Then he again went over his conversation with Mrs. Lewit. Now he settled into deep thought. He was oblivious of time and place when Franky's voice brought him back. "I brung her this time," the youngster said. "Before I always told her where you was, but this time she wanted me to bring her."

Duke reached out and took Kathie's hand. "Thanks, Franky, but before you go, there's something I want to ask you."

"Got another penny?"

Again Duke doled out. "You get around plenty. Tell me—did you ever see The Beast?"

Franky did not reply for a moment. Then he said, "Gee, you talk funny."

"What do you mean?"

"The words you say. I dunno—they're different some way. Bigger."

"Never mind that. Answer my question."

"Sure I seen it."

"What did it look like?"

"Just like they said in church. It was fifteen feet high with red eyes and arms like tree trunks. It looked kind of like a man, only bigger'n any man I ever saw. I ran like anything."

"Did you see it in the daytime, or at night?"

"At night, when Willy Nickels and me was over in the slough after bull frogs. There was a moon."

"Okay, Franky. You earned your penny. Take a sneak, now."

"Huh?"

"Go on home."

"Gee, you talk funny lately."

DUKE WAITED until the brushing footsteps faded in the direction of the house and the pale form disappeared. He reached out and Kathie came into his arms. "How was it, baby?"

"Duke! I was never so glad to see anybody in my life!" She clung to him.

"Pretty bad, huh?"

"That old battle-axe spanked me! *Spanked* me, right over her knee in front of a dozen brats!"

Duke hoped the darkness hid his grin. "Your family?"

"On my bare skin, with nothing underneath this—this filthy rag I'm wearing. Duke! I want to go home."

"Sure, baby, sure. But listen. You know the plot of *The Spector of Suicide Swamp?*"

"Of course I do."

"Was it an original? Any idea where it came from?"

"Epic bought it from some freelance, or so I heard. The way I got it the story was inspired by a news

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story that broke in the east not long ago."

"Tell me what you know about it."

Kathie clung closer, as though for warmth. "Duke, does it matter? That was a thousand years ago in another world. A world I want to go back to."

"I know, but—"

"Here I am climbing all over you and nothing happens. You don't even kiss me. Duke—I'm cold and scared and weak. This is your big opportunity."

He kissed her lightly. "Tell me about the story."

She sighed. "One of us is slipping. Oh well. . . ." She cuddled closer. "There was a bank robbery in some eastern town where some crackpot scientist was building a robot. By an odd coincidence, the scientist was killed and the robot disappeared the same night the bank was robbed. This writer took the two incidents and tied them together. He—he extra—extra—"

"Extrapolated. Took certain facts and built onto them to arrive at other pseudofacts."

"Or something. Anyhow, that's where the plot came from. This writer had a gang kill the scientist and steal the robot and break open the bank with it. Then they loaded a safe and the robot into a big trailer truck and headed south. They—"

"I know the rest. They dumped the truck into quicksand, after some of them were killed and the robot got loose. I wish I'd known about it before."

"About what?"

"The news-story angle. Kathie, I think I know why we're here. If there's any rhyme or reason to anything, there must be a reason for our being dropped into this swamp, and I've got a hunch I know what it is. There wasn't any Prophet in the *Spector* script, was there?"

Kathie nuzzled Duke's cheek with her nose. "Uh-uh. What's happened to you? Are you a lot older than you look? Maybe you've turned senile."

Duke quit thinking about his problems and started to show Kathie he wasn't senile. The kiss didn't last long, however, It was interrupted by a crashing in the trees nearby. Then two red spotlights lit the area to a bloody glow.

Kathie screamed. Duke's blood froze as he goggled up at a huge monstrosity fresh from a Frankenstein set. He flung Kathie to the ground and fell on top of her.

TOM SAT with elbows on knees, holding his head in his hands. "Ginny—for Lord's sake! I'm tired. I want to go to bed."

"We can't go to bed, Tom. Not 'til we know these parts. Now say the words again. Say them."

"Oh, all right. Ah. . . let's see now . . . darling, I've got to tell you the truth. Our chances of getting out alive are. . . are. . . well, they ain't good."

"Tom! Say it right."

"—are very small."

"Oh, Harold. I'm afraid. I'm afraid!"

"We can't go through the slough. The 'gators are waiting there. The high grass is alive with cottonmouth snakes. And in the forest—the Spectre!"

"Oh Harold—Harold!"

Tom lapsed again into perplexed reality. "I just don't understand it. How in tarnation did they get theirselves into such a fuddle? Glory be! Scared of a few snakes and a toothless old bull 'gator."

"Tom! The writer knows better than you do."

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"He knows better than me how people live in the swamp?"

"He gets paid for knowing—and writing about it."

"Well, I'll vow he couldn't sell much of his writing down Ogmulee way. They laugh him right out of the county." Tom leaned forward, frowning in puzzlement. "Ginny, you see anything funny about this story?"

"Funny? Of course not. It's serious drama."

"I don't mean funny that way. I mean the things it's got in it. The men coming south in the big truck with the—the robot and killing each other. That big truck could be the same one Joe Davis saw going into the quicksand. It goes into the quicksand in this story too."

"That doesn't matter. We've *got* to learn these parts."

"You know—I think that's what really happened to Joe and Laury. I think Joe went down there and dived, trying to find the truck. Then maybe Laury got scared and went in after him."

Ginny laid down the script. "The Prophet said it was the vengeance of the Lord."

"Somehow—now that I'm away from him—I don't take much stock in that Prophet. I always had the feeling there was something about his eyes that got a person. They bored into you peculiar-like."

"He said the Lord had him by the hand."

"Maybe—say, Ginny, this robot-thing in the story. Doesn't say what it looks like. Wonder if it could be anything like The Beast that tromped all over the Carter's house?"

"It might."

Tom's eyes saddened. "Kind of wish I was back there—Prophet or no Prophet. I'd sure like to find me a hill alive with cottonmouth like it says in this story. Never saw anything like that in my life."

"Tom, let's try it once more. Do it right this time and I'll let you go to sleep."

"All right, Ginny. I'll do my best. That looks like a mighty wonderful bed. I've been itching to get into it. Hope that other fellow don't come back and want it just when I get comfortable."

BUT, AFTER five minutes, Tom again became entangled in reality. He said, "You know, Ginny—since we got clean away from that Prophet, he kind of begins to interest me. Funny how he changed, isn't it?"

Ginny sighed and put the script on the table. "How do you mean *changed,* Tom?"

"Well, he wasn't always like he was then—is now—oh, tarnation! This here and there business gets me all mixed up. I wish I knew who I was—am."

Ginny was pondering also. "It was a little strange, thinking back, how the Prophet changed. The people at Ogmulee never seemed to give that much mind."

"Too scared, probably."

"I can remember how he was before his wife died and his boy ran away. That must have been pretty hard on him, Tom."

"The trouble was he always stayed above other folks. Never let them help him. Guess that's the way with people that depend on the Lord. When they need something and the Lord's taking a day off—out fishing or something—ordinary folks' help seems pretty stringy."

"His boy Louie was an odd one."

"Uh-huh. None of the kids liked him very much, maybe 'cause he was a preacher's son." Tom rubbed his

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chin reflectively. "Ginny—I wouldn't much like being a preacher's son. Must have been pretty lonely. Never going with the kids to swipe a chicken, or on Halloween. Never getting in a fight."

"No wonder he ran away. He was probably pretty lonesome."

"Uh-huh. And it ain't—"

"—*isn't*—"

"—isn't very hard to see why the Preacher went off kind of, getting two kicks in the face like that so close together."

Ginny picked up the script, but Tom reached out tensely and stayed her hand. "Ginny—I think I got it figured out!"

"What?"

"The real answer! What really happened! When you go crazy, you go one way or another—crazy over *something*, that is. Like old Mose Keeley went moon-crazy. Remember how he used to look at the moon all the time—and when it wasn't in the sky how he used to cry for it to come out?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Well—the Prophet went money-crazy!"

"But he never had more than fifteen cents at one time in his life. He lived off the land."

"That's it. After reading this story I can figure it out. There was money in the big truck Joe and Laury saw. It was the Prophet, I'll bet, that shoved it into the quicksand. But he'd snagged the money first. And I'll bet he killed Joe and Laury 'cause they saw him do it!"

"Tom! You're crazy!"

"Maybe I am—maybe I'm not. But I'll bet I know where the money is. You know that little shack by the slough, where old Ken Cooley lived? You know—Ken Cooley that died when he drank too much and saw more snakes than they've even got in this story. Well—the Prophet chased the kids away from that shack three times. My little brother Franky told me about it. That's where the Prophet's got all that money hid, Ginny. You can take my word for it."

"But that doesn't make any difference to us, Tom. We don't care any more. We got more important things on our mind. We've got to learn these parts!"

Tom sighed. "All right, Ginny. Let's have another go at it. Glory be! I never see such a one-track woman in all my born days!"

"DUKE, WHEN are we going to leave this awful place? You keep saying tomorrow, and tomorrow, but it never comes. When, Duke?"

Duke smiled down at Kathie. The lipstick and the rouge were, of course, long gone. The mascara was about worn away. He was just finding out what Kathie really looked like. "One of these days, baby. Take it easy."

"But Duke—"

"I wonder if you realize how you've changed, Kathie?"

"Changed? How?"

"In the old days you'd have asked me once: 'You want to go? Then get the lead out.' You'd have given me ten minutes—maybe five. Then you'd have hit the road alone with never a backward glance."

Kathie seemed bewildered. "But this horrid swamp! I can't go alone. The snakes—"

"I've yet to meet the snake that could have scared the old Kathie."

She lowered her head; put her face in her hands.

Duke said, "We'll go, angel, but there are some things around here that interest me. I've got to have some answers first."

Kathie shuddered. "You must have gotten one the other night! That hor-

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rible—thing! With its terrible green eyes!"

Duke froze; then thawed slowly; reached down and raised Kathie's face. "What did you say?"

"That *thing!*"

"You said something else. With the terrible what?"

"Green eyes."

Duke pondered on this before he said, "That's funny. I saw terrible *red* eyes."

"What does it matter? Red, green, purple! It was still horrible."

"It may matter a lot. You stay here a while. I'll be back. I want to do some investigating."

They had a secluded nook between two huge trees where they met; a place the Prophet hadn't come upon. Duke hurried away from it, without a backward glance, toward the village. Breaking into the open he saw the swamp folk going about their various businesses, and it suddenly came to him that his status among them had gradually changed.

Changed so slowly, he'd scarcely realized it himself until this moment. Now they seemed to silently look to him for leadership. It was not a request for leadership exactly, more a matter of asking for it silently, by look and by manner.

For one thing, there were no more pennies needed to get favors from Franky. The penny thing had been dropped by common consent and without comment. Duke called, "Hey, Franky!"

The youngster looked up from his play and came running. "What you want, Tom?"

"The other night, when the Beast visited us. You remember?"

"Sure I remember."

"Tell me—what did it look like to you?"

"It looked like what it was. Big and snorting, with a great big red eye in the middle of its forehead."

"One eye?"

"Sure—one big eye. You saw it, didn't you?"

"Uh-huh. It almost ran me down."

AMOS CARTER was patiently rebuilding his house. He straightened and said, "Afternoon, Tom. Ain't seen much of you lately."

"No, I've been up in the swamp a lot."

"Dangerous place to go, son."

"Uh-huh. Listen, Amos—the night that the Beast wrecked your place. Did you see it pretty clear?"

"Clear as a man can see anything ten feet away from him."

"Exactly what did it look like?"

"I told that at the church. It was about fifteen feet high. It had two red light bulbs for eyes and looked a lot like a man only a lot bigger. It was made of steel and it walked on two legs."

Duke rubbed his chin and stared at the house. "Well, anyhow, there's no doubt it busted up your house, Amos."

"And like to o' killed my family and me. We' was sure lucky. Sure didn't know we was so sinful, but we'll be more careful after this. Prayers every night and morning and at dinner, too. The Prophet says that's the ticket."

"I'D ALMOST given you up," Kathie said.

"It took me longer than I thought, but I think I'm getting somewhere. I talked to seven different people, Kathie, and it was amazing. Every one of them has a different idea as to what The Beast looks like."

"What's unusual about that? Did

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you ever read what seven different eye-witnesses to an accident have to say? You'd think they saw seven different accidents."

"Not quite that bad, but here's the interesting point: Only one man—Amos Carter—has the same description as you and I."

"But ours weren't the same."

"They were basically. We differed only on the color of the eyes. And Kathie—we're probably the only two people around here who actually know what a robot should look like."

"It's kind of complicated, Ginny—"

"*Ginny?* Now wait a minute!"

"Kathie. I'm sorry."

"That's better. Now I *know* we've got to get away from here."

"I think I'm getting this thing unravelled, but as I say, it's kind of complicated. We know the writer who did *The Spectre* script took certain facts, combined them, and projected a story. It could have been one of those rare cases where the projection followed actual facts to an astonishing degree. Look at the way it fits: he had some crooks use the robot to crack a bank. We don't know whether that actually happened or not. But he had them load a safe and the robot into a six-wheel trailer truck and start south. That ties in some way, because those two kids who were killed told of seeing a trailer truck sunk in some quicksand."

"The story duplicated that too," Kathie said.

"Right. Now the question is this: did the writer send the truck into the swamp just because Epic had an idle set and wanted a swamp picture, or did he have some other reason for doing it?"

"I know how we could find out, Duke, darling."

"How?"

"By going back to Hollywood."

Duke didn't seem to hear her. "I've got a feeling the writer had a basic reason for the swamp locale. That's what's missing from the puzzle."

KATHIE reached up and gently pulled Duke's ear. Possibly, she thought to herself, somewhat dreamily, she had changed as Duke said. In the old days she'd never been interested in Duke's left ear. Now it seemed to be such a fine ear; a strong, masculine ear. Kathie said, "Duke, where is all this getting you? You're just throwing around pieces of a picture puzzle."

"Not exactly. Angel, I think I've got part of it figured out. The Prophet is mad—we know that. He's killer-mad. I think he killed the men in that truck—that he sunk it in the quicksand—that he got the robot to carry the money to a safe place for him—and that now he's protecting the money with all this hocus-pocus."

"But that doesn't make too much sense. Why doesn't he take the money and get out of here, if he's got it?"

"Honey, we're dealing with a madman—remember? They never act logical."

"You may be right about his having the robot."

"I think he *had* it, but I don't think it's working any more. I think he used it once to bust up the Carter house."

"We saw it the other night!"

"This Prophet, baby, is a smarter guy than we give him credit for being. He's got hidden talents. You know what I've got to do?"

"Kiss me."

Duke kissed her. "I've got to go further—"

Kathie lay back in his arms and rumpled his hair, murmured dreamily,

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"Without a marriage license, darling? I never believed it of you."

"We've got to find out where he's got that money hidden."

"Maybe there wasn't any money. You're merely projecting."

"I think there was."

"How about in the church?"

"I doubt that. His religious fanaticism, even though it's only a part of his madness, wouldn't permit him to hide it there."

"I think you're just talking in order to kill time and stay around here. I think you actually like the place."

He grinned. "It isn't that I like this place more, but maybe I like some other place less." He kissed her. "Guess you better be getting back, or your mom'll give you another tanning."

Kathie blushed as she got to her feet. She postured, tightening the cloth of her dress over her hip. She indicated a small rip in the material. "Look there. See underneath? That's cloth from two floursacks. I made some panties. Now a tanning isn't quite so embarrassing."

Duke laughed aloud. "Two flour sacks? Woman, you're sure spreading out."

"I am not! I never made a pair of pants before and I wasted a lot of material."

IT WAS Sunday morning and the swamp folk gathered at the church under the giant magnolia trees. They all came. None would dare stay away. Some were sick, but they came on the arms of others strong enough to help them. Every seat was filled.

Duke sat with the Lewits, surrounded by theoretical brothers and sisters he was getting to know—and to like.

After the congregation had been kept waiting for a half hour, the Prophet strode in. He moved up the aisle staring straight ahead, like a Moses at the front of a conquering army. He reached the pulpit and turned, taking the Bible lying there in his great hands and raising it.

"Down on your knees!"

Like puppets, the congregation complied. Duke, his head lowered as were all the other heads in the place, stole a side and forward glance toward the pew of the Hays family—toward Kathie, kneeling demurely beside the shapeless Amazon who was supposed to be her mother. Duke's heart warmed at the sight of the slim girl in the tattered dress. He jerked his eyes back to the floor as the Prophet's voice thundered out:

"Oh Lord, we are sinners!"

The congregation responded. "Oh Lord, we are sinners."

"We deserve only your wrath."

The congregation agreed. They agreed also to other things that made Duke's skin crawl; agreed as the madman in the pulpit reviled them in flaming words—rotten words trimmed with blue fire.

Why do they take it? Duke asked himself. How this man had managed to cow and beat to the ground so many inherently strong and independent people was almost beyond conception.

Duke raised his eyes now, using the head in front as a blind, and studied the Prophet directly. It was the first time he'd gotten a really good look at the madman, and he found himself mentally cringing away—avoiding the impact of the power behind that face.

Several pieces of the puzzle clicked into place. Of course! He—

The Prophet started suddenly—like a sensitive, thoroughbred race horse at an unaccustomed sound. His burning eyes came unerringly around to

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lock with those of Duke. He held Duke utterly helpless in a living gaze; like a bird trapped by the eyes of a snake. Duke felt hot perspiration well from his skin. He felt something shrivel and dry up inside his brain—withered and dried to powder by the blast-furnace of those maniac's eyes.

HE SENSED a sneer of contempt riding the twin fire-beams into his brain—and he was free. Tossed aside as the Prophet released him—tossed down as a butcher would toss a stripped bone. Duke lowered his head and fought a wave of nausea and weakness. And he knew that he lost consciousness for a moment, because the Prophet's booming voice came to him gradually, as though a loudspeaker's volume had been slowly increased.

"—and the Lord came to me in a cloud of fire and said, 'Tell my children to stay far from the wicked lands to the north; from the pine groves and the marshes and the swamp lands that border the far side of the Ogmulee River. For I am a jealous God and will smite them in all my fury if they disobey you, my chosen servant'. This the Lord told me in a dream, and it was a true dream. 'Stay away from the land I name, sayeth the Lord, because it is my land of vengeance!' "

The Prophet paused to survey his flock. Again his voice thundered out: "You—Morton Willis—stand up and face thy God!"

Duke looked far sidewise to see a thin, terrorized man come slowly to his feet. And all the time, in Duke's mind, a still voice was saying: *This can't be. It can't be.* But it was. A madman holding a churchful of strong men and women in groveling subservience.

"Morton Willis, you broke God's commandment. You were hunting across the river yesterday."

"But—but, I didn't know. You didn't say nothing about—"

"The vengeance of God is all-inclusive. He quibbles not over a day or a month or an eon. You have broken His law!"

"Ye-yes. Reckon I did."

"You shall do penance."

"I'll do penance."

"For three days you and your family will stay within your house. You shall cover the windows and no one shall look out upon the night nor the day. If this is not done, The Beast shall—"

"It'll be done—it'll be done!"

There was such fear in the assurance that Duke felt sickened.

DUKE SAID, "The quicksand where the truck may have been sunk, and that old cabin you're talking about, are both the other side of the river?"

Franky nodded. "That's right. Over by Loon Marsh, where it's real wild."

"You must be wrong about the truck, though. How could a six-wheel trailer get in there without bogging down long before the quicksand? It would be impossible."

"No, it wouldn't. There's hard land—a long rocky ridge that runs past Big Foot Slough and among the pine hummocks. It all ain't marshy over there."

"I'd like to take a look."

Franky whistled. "You heard what the Prophet said on Sunday!" Franky didn't look particularly scared, however. Going against the Prophet would be too much of an adventure.

Duke noted this with satisfaction. "He wouldn't have to know."

"But what if he found out and sent The Beast after us?"

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"We could run. I'll bet The Beast can't cross the river."

"I'll bet it can. It's got legs like trees. It could wade right across the Ogmulgee."

"Maybe so, but we could stay out of its way. I'll bet you know some places to hide from it."

Franky said, "When do you want to go?"

"What's wrong with right now? It isn't more than ten o'clock."

Franky was suspicious. "You fixing to take that old Ginny Hays with you?"

Duke shook his head. "Nope. This trip is just for men."

"That's right," Franky scowled. "We don't want any old girls tagging along."

"Lead on, MacDuff!"

"Who?"

"Lead the way. I'm right behind you."

Duke followed Franky over a tortuous route that led three miles southward, and decided he was getting old. Or maybe it was too many cigarettes. Anyhow, he was thankful when Franky pulled up at a stagnant inlet and waded boldly into the water. He pushed in among some overhanging grass tufts and pulled out a lopsided, badly-beaten-up scow. "Bet The Beast couldn't ever find this."

"Looks like it needs some repairs. Will it get us across the river?"

"Sure will—after we bail it out."

They bailed it out and it repaid the kindness by taking them safely across the half-mile channel. Franky cached the boat again and started a new trek across even wilder country.

But the land got gradually higher and the going easier until the ridge came in sight. As they topped it, Duke could see the possibility of a truck making a safe way along its crest. Franky stopped and dropped to his knees. "See here? Rubber tire tracks—big ones. If a truck didn't make them, what did?"

"I think you've got something here." Duke could plainly follow the wide diamond tread through several stops of shallow sand.

A SENSE of impossibility—unreality—suddenly assailed him. How could a script writer have taken any set of facts and extrapolated a sequence of events so stunningly accurate? So accurate that an almost true story was even now being shot on a swamp set in Hollywood. "That guy knew something," Duke muttered.

"What guy?"

"Never mind. Let's get to that patch of quicksand."

It was about a mile farther on where the ridge became a smooth, gentle slope across reasonably solid meadowland to end sharply in black, sinister marsh. Here, the big double treads were easily seen. There was a two-hundred-yard sweep of hard ground to the swamp edge. Duke saw how it had been done. Speed. He saw the big truck starting down the slope wide open—picking up speed. It could have been hitting seventy at the swamp edge. Speed enough to send it end-over-end out into the black water if the front wheels stuck first.

When, Duke wondered, had the driver jumped? Or had there been a driver? He stood at the swamp edge and looked down into the black water. There would be little chance of ever retrieving the truck that lay, probably, under many feet of sucking sand. The truck or anything else caught in that awful mouth.

"You figuring on going in after it?" Franky grinned.

"Not today."

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"Or any other day. Anything down in that sump is gone for good."

"Is the shack you were talking about very far from here?"

"About a mile up the line. You want to go look at it?"

"If you aren't afraid. I'm kind of curious."

"It's back this way."

They reversed their course and went back the way they'd come. After some twenty minutes of walking along the rocky ridge, Franky veered suddenly in-country, away from the river. He glanced over his shoulder toward the lowering sun. "Getting kind of late. We got to hurry or you won't see much."

"They may not like it at home—your being late."

"When Ma finds out I've been with you, she won't care."

Duke took the tribute in silence, his attention caught by a wide marsh they were skirting. Here, truly, was nature at her saddest. There was enough of the poet in Duke to envy the Master Artists who had done this scene.

For endless miles there stretched a melancholy waste of water reddened by the setting sun and dotted by myriad clusters of drooping cat tails and grasses. Each tiny sound was magnified a thousandfold by the brooding silence. A frog croaked somewhere and the sound came echoing across the marsh to fade away in a dozen weakening echoes.

Out against the red sunset, a lone heron rose up on awkward wings to emit a sad cry and lumber off across the marsh to some rendezvous.

FRANKY stopped. Duke, preoccupied with the beauty about him, caught himself sharply.

"There it is."

Ahead was a clump of Georgia pine, scattered sparsely. In its heart stood a lone, bleak building—little more than a shack—weakened by years—its ridge pole sagging and tilted at a crazy angle.

"That's it," Franky said. "What do you think's in there?"

"I wish I knew."

"Nothing but a old abandoned shack. Why should the Prophet care whether us kids played in it or not?"

"I can't figure it out."

Franky, trying not to show his apprehension of the gathering darkness, looked swiftly about in a wide circle. "You think maybe the Prophet's hiding around here somewhere? Watching us maybe?"

"I doubt it. There's no place to hide."

"Plenty of trees over beyond. We have to go through them to get to the shallows, or else go back and get the scow."

"The place certainly looks deserted."

A thought struck Franky. "Maybe—could be the Prophet's on the inside a waitin' for us. Maybe he knew we were coming here and he crouching in there—"

"How would he know?"

"The Prophet has ways of finding things out."

"We'll know if he's there—when I take a look."

"You're going in the shack?"

"We came all this way. We're going to find out one way or another."

"Th-then let's get over to it before we can't see nothing."

"You'd better wait for me."

"Uh-uh. If you go, I'm going too. I ain't no coward."

Duke smiled and touseled Franky's thick blonde hair. "That's my boy! Come on."

There appeared to be no danger whatever. An old shack—forgotten, de-

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serted, miles from nowhere on the edge of a wild marshland. A shack with a false reputation for danger.

The door had not fallen away. In fact, the door seemed remarkably well-preserved for so old a building. It was closed and the fit was snug.

Duke grasped the door knob after a moment and listened. Nothing had sounded to frighten even a bird. Duke pushed open the door.

Only thick darkness met the eye. Darkness and silence. Duke put a foot over the door sill.

BUT HE jerked it back quickly and whirled at Franky's scream of terror. Duke turned. Franky was pointing, but no indication of direction was necessary.

"The Beast," Franky screamed. "He set The Beast on us!"

And there it was, lumbering toward them from the marshes. A huge, terrifying monstrosity of full fifteen feet, with red rays flaring from crimson eye sockets.

"The Beast." Franky was already in panic-flight, across the open land toward the woods beyond. Duke got his legs moving and set out in pursuit. Behind the fleeing pair came the Prophet's instrument of vengeance.

"Franky!" Duke yelled. "Wait. It's all right. Don't be scared!"

It was like asking a person in a flaming house not to be burned. Franky ran with the speed of pure terror.

Duke's longer strides began to cut down the intervening distance. The speed of the thundering thing behind, however, was greater by far than that of Duke.

Duke caught up with Franky just on the edge of the woodland, and just as the monster was throwing rays of streaming red light over his shoulder. Duke reached out and brought Franky to the ground. "It's all right, kid! Take it easy. Lie still! Nothing's going to happen to you."

Then they seemed in the very maw of destruction—in the thunder and grind of a runaway locomotive.

But there was no agony save the agony of fear—no death—no ravening destruction. It seemed that the monster passed over them harmlessly, but not to travel on its maniacal way.

Rather to become a thing of silence—to fade and vanish, and become nothing.

"It's all over, Franky. There isn't any Beast. No Beast at all. See? You're still alive and in one piece. It didn't hurt you."

Franky was still sobbing out his terror as Duke held him close. Duke made no effort to hurry things, letting time take its course; letting Franky's fear die a natural death.

As they sat there a huge moon pushed up over the marsh, lighting the country all around—throwing its radiance until the lonely shack again stood out sharp and clear.

Franky at last found words. "There—there wasn't no Beast? But there had to be. I saw it!"

"Look, Franky. Where did it come from? Which way?"

"From the marsh."

"But it didn't come out of the marsh or we'd have seen it. It just appeared suddenly out on the level ground."

"It must have come from somewhere."

"It did, Franky. Out of your own mind."

The boy looked bewildered—found no words. Duke went on: "Franky, there are people who can put things into the minds of other people. Have you ever heard of hypnotism?"

"Isn't that when somebody makes you do things when you're asleep?"

"That's the idea. But there are

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stronger forms of hypnotism than that. And there are people who can do funny things along that line. Some crazy people especially. When a mind goes mad it sometimes gets stronger. False strength, maybe, but still strength. There was a Russian once—a man named Rasputin—who was crazy and yet had the ability to make people do things they didn't want to and even see things that don't exist. The Prophet is that way. He has the power to make people see The Beast that isn't there."

FRANKY thought that over for a moment before he said, "Then did Mr. Carter just imagine his house got tromped on? I saw the place. It was a mess."

"There *was* a monster, Franky. It did wreck the Carter house. But I'm sure something happened to it. I've got a hunch it bogged down in a swamp some place. The tipoff was when I found out everybody sees a different kind of a Beast. The one you see isn't the same as the one I see. Everybody at the landing sees a different one because each person has a different mind and imagination. The Prophet can make them see a Beast, but he can't make them all see the same one, because he's really forcing them to create their own Beasts out of their own imaginations."

Franky shook his head. "That's all pretty mixed up. I can't hardly make head or tail of it, but if you say so..." Franky's eyes went vague. Apparently his mind had conjured up another question. "Look, Tom. Suppose all you say is true. There's one thing I can't cypher out: why's the Prophet doing it? Why does he want to go around scaring people who never did him no harm?"

"That's a pretty deep question. Probably he thinks he's doing the right thing. His conception of God and God's law is a little twisted up. You can't blame him, because he's crazy, and crazy people aren't to be held accountable for their actions."

"You know, he wasn't always this way. It's just the last year or so. He used to be all right. He'd make fish poles and hooks for the kids, and he was all right. Then he began getting funny. Making people afraid of him."

"He's got the people terrorized with this imaginary Beast. He probably got the idea from the real one."

"But why'd he set the Beast on us today? We weren't doing no harm."

"I think it was because he didn't want us to look into that shack. I've got a hunch we'll find the answer to a lot of things in there."

"You going to look?"

"That's right."

Franky stared apprehensively at the shack. It stood bleak and silent under the yellow moon—hostile now, forbidding. "Maybe we better go home now and come back tomorrow. There ain't no hurry, is there?"

"No. But we've come a long way and I don't want to go home without getting what we came for. I think the Prophet is hiding a lot of money there. I want to find out."

"Money? What'd he want with money? It wouldn't do him no good."

"I think loving money is a part of his madness. Listen—you stay here where you can watch me, and I'll have a quick look into the house. It won't take a minute."

"Well—all right. But I'm going with you. We're together in this thing. I ain't any coward."

"Good boy. The place is obviously deserted. There's no danger whatever. Just think! If we find the money you'll be in line for a reward."

"How much?"

"Oh, maybe as much as a hundred

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dollars. Come on. Let's go inside."

THEY WALKED hand in hand toward the forlorn shack by the marsh; walked under a yellow moon that turned the world to day, glinted over the lonely water and accentuated the black, staring windows of the building.

As they came close their feet found a path, well-worn but now grown over with meadow grass. A path made by feet long gone and now forgotten; a path made in happier days.

"Gosh!" Franky whispered. "I wonder what we'll find."

They were ten feet from the door when it opened—opened wide—and the huge figure of the Prophet stepped forth.

To Duke the sight was far more chilling than had been that of The Beast. Here was no figment of a man's imagination. Here was a towering pillar of mad strength. Here was a killer. Here was death.

Franky whimpered and cringed back. Duke, frozen in his tracks, felt somehow that retreat was useless.

The Prophet flung out his arms in a gesture too full of threat to be theatrical. His voice boomed up to the yellow moon. "Ye of the transgressor's band! Ye who disobey the command of the Lord God! Ye who are facing death!"

Duke kept his eyes on the huge maniac, reached back to touch Franky's shoulder. "Run, kid. Get the hell out of here. Hit for the river and home!"

It was Duke's last moment of respite. The Prophet, with a bull-roar of rage, charged full at him.

"Run, Franky!"

Duke would have been the first to concede himself to be no fighter. All his life he had avoided trouble rather than faced it. But never before had he looked death in the face. Never before had his life itself been at stake. His instinct rose to the occasion—at least partially.

It told him that once those great arms encircled him he would be through. They would crush his ribs, break his back. Once in the Prophet's embrace, he would not escape alive.

Nor could he possibly outrun the giant. So he did the thing his instinct told him to do. He struck out.

It was a good punch, a hard, straight right flush to the Prophet's mouth. Duke felt teeth snap under his knuckles; felt the blow recoil up his own arm into his shoulder.

It stopped the Prophet, sent him reeling backward. But Duke was not deceived. It had been mainly the surprise of the thing that had caught the Prophet off balance. He had not expected resistance.

The flowing white beard was stained with crimson as the Prophet reeled against the wall of the shack and came erect. He passed a hand across his mouth, wiping away the blood.

Here, Duke made a major mistake. He could have run; could probably have gotten enough of a head start to achieve the wooded area not too far away.

BUT THE success of the blow gave him a false courage. It had been so simple, possibly one more blow could do the trick. Maybe this mountainous maniac was not invincible. So Duke chose to stay and fight.

The Prophet came forward again. This time there was no roar of wrath, but the silence was even more frightening than the bellowed challenge. Out went the giant arms to enfold Duke in a death grip.

Again Duke slammed a jarring right fist into the wholly unprotected face; again the sound of flesh grinding

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against bone; again the Prophet staggered back.

But not so far this time. And he recovered quicker; came back to the attack sooner. Duke, flooded by a sense of desperation, aimed the third blow lower down. Swinging from the ankles, he sought to drive his fist, up to the wrist, into that sensitive spot just above the stomach. A powerful blow to the *solar plexus* could be an actual killer. It had caused more than one death.

Duke could as well have slammed his fist against a brick wall. He cried out from the pain and the bones of his hand snapped. The Prophet had a body of iron.

Duke sagged from the shock. Then the Prophet's arms went around him—found their hold. Duke stared into the eyes of death.

The pain in his bending spine was well nigh unbearable. But the Prophet chose not to end it quickly. The enemy must suffer. He applied the pressure as from an eye-dropper—gradually. Slowly Duke's spine was bent into a backward bow.

A scream ripped Duke's ears. He realized it came from his own lips. But only one scream because, now, there was no air for his lungs. A scream would have been a luxury.

The pain was a crimson sea in which he floated. White hot bubbles of agony seared his flesh. Until consciousness was blotted out. Until the crimson sea turned into a black ocean and there was nothing. . . .

"TOM—TOM! Wake up! You gotta wake up, Tom! I can't lug you no farther!"

Duke opened his eyes to see shadows—bars—across the yellow moon. Slowly he realized the bars were tree-branches. "Franky? That you?"

"Uh-huh. It's me. You all right now, Tom? You feeling better now, Tom?"

"I—I guess so. What happened?"

"When the fight started I ran. I was that scared. I stopped in the trees and looked back and saw you and the Prophet wrestling. Then you let out a scream and I knew he had you. I had to do something, Tom, so I grabbed me a club and run back. The Prophet wasn't paying no attention to me so I hauled off and let him have a good one right across his head. He went down like a axed steer and I tried to wake you up. It was pretty hard, but I started dragging you and then you come to some and started kind of half walking. It was a little easier then, but I got plumb tuckered and had to put you down."

"Franky, you saved my life. You saved me from the Prophet."

"Think you can get up?"

"I think so. How far is the boat."

"Not far, but I ain't taking you home. You got to stay out of sight. I don't think I killed the Prophet, and now he'll really be gunning for you. You got to hide while I go home and scout around."

"It's all right. We'll go home to—"

"What's the matter?"

"I think it's my ribs. One of them's broken. It feels like a sharp point is digging in somewhere."

"I know a place, if you can walk another quarter mile."

"I can make it."

"All right—but real slow."

The place Franky knew was a hollowed-out embankment in the piney woods, a place made soft by many droppings of pine needles. Franky said, "That old Prophet won't find you here. You just get some sleep and I'll go home and see how things look. The Prophet'll probably come there looking for you. I'll sneak something to eat out in the morning. Don't make no sound."

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"I'll be all right. Say—Franky, will you tell Ginny where I am?"

Franky's eyes fell. He spoke in a hurt voice. "You want that old girl knowing about it? Ain't I taking care of you all right?"

"Sure, Franky. I've changed my mind. Better not tell her—for a while anyway."

"See you in the morning."

Franky moved away like a shadow, and soon Duke was alone. He thought of Kathie. But he was glad Franky had objected to telling her. Better to leave her out of this until it took a turn one way or the other.

If Duke knew anything about psychology, the Prophet would be a raging demon of vengeance now. Probably, Duke thought, he had done the people at the landing a disservice with his snooping. The Prophet would come searching and his wrath would be terrible.

Duke thought of Kathie. She'd be wondering about him. No doubt he had done her a disservice too. Slowly, he drifted off to sleep.

"TOM! TOM! Wake up."

The voice was soft, insistent. Duke opened his eyes.

"It's your mother, son. Wake up."

"Ma."

"What's happened, Tom? What did the Prophet do to you?"

Duke blinked gummy eyes. The faint light told him it was early dawn. "We had a little set-to, Ma. I'm all right." Duke saw Franky hovering uneasily in the background.

Franky said, "I didn't mean to tell, Tom, but Ma, she kind of wormed it out of me. Then she made me bring her here."

"It's all right, kid."

"Franky said you were hurt in the chest. I brought some bandages. Can you sit up?"

Duke struggled to a sitting position. "It won't be bad when the stiffness is gone. Did the Prophet turn up at the landing?"

"No. Nobody's seen hide nor hair of him."

"He will. He's sure to come back there looking for me."

"Maybe I killed him," Franky said with a certain awe.

"Not a chance. You couldn't swing a club heavy enough to break that skull. He'll be along, and I've got to be at the landing when he gets there."

Mrs. Lewit's eyes were on Duke. He saw the puzzled look; the look he'd seen so often lately. He said, "Franky, take a little walk, will you? I want to talk to Ma."

"Sure—sure, Tom."

He watched in silence as Franky moved slowly, reluctantly, out of earshot. Then he turned his eyes back to the woman he had grown to love almost as a son loves a mother.

"Ma—you know I'm not your son, don't you?"

Her eyes were hard on his face. "Yes—yes, I think I do. You look the same. You act—almost the same. But there's something."

"Tom is a long way from here. In a place called Hollywood, I think. He'll probably be back to see you eventually."

"I—I don't understand. Why did he go away?"

"He doesn't know himself. He didn't go—he was taken away. Just as I was brought here. We changed places, just as Ginny changed places with a girl called Kathie."

"You mean Ginny Hays isn't—?"

"She isn't Ginny. Ginny, I think, is with Tom."

"That's good. They were in love with each other." Mrs. Lewit's eyes filled with something Duke had a hard time describing. Bitterness per-

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haps—and sadness. "They never had much chance in the swamp."

Duke marveled. "You're an amazing woman. No disbelief. And you take it so calmly—with such patience. Do you feel what I've told you is true?"

"I don't know. But I think maybe it is."

And Duke, who had gently patronized this woman, was suddenly ashamed of himself. Instead of giving her of his knowledge, he realized he should be seeking out hers. "Ma—why do you think it happened? I know it did happen, but I don't know why. Do you?"

"Prayer, maybe. I've prayed, and so have the other women of the landing; prayed to be rid of the scourge in our midst—the Prophet. We were helpless, and prayer was all we had. They say God moves in mysterious ways. Maybe you coming here was the only way."

"Maybe the Prophet will kill me, Ma."

There was a quiet strength in the woman—a strength Duke was testing. She said, "I don't think so. I think, somehow, that this is the end of the Prophet." She looked down at Duke. "But, still, I don't want you to go back and face him."

"I've got to. I know that. I've got to be at the landing when he comes."

"If that's what your heart tells you."

"It does. The Prophet isn't what he appears to be to the people. He's a poor, tortured, misguided man. I think, in the end, we'll help him."

"Come, lean on my shoulder."

THE PEOPLE gathered silently, and Duke talked. A change came over his audience, but Duke realized he could take credit for only a small part of it. The change was wrought by his story rather than by his words.

He had met the Prophet and had fled. That, to them, was entirely understandable. No man could stand before the white-bearded maniac avenger. But through the long hours of the day Duke had waited at the landing for the Prophet to come for him. He had waited in vain, and in his waiting the people had found a hope which was, in reality, a strength.

The Prophet *should* have come. He should have charged into the landing long since, his eyes aflame with vengeance. He had not done this. Was he delaying because of fear? Or weakness?

Thus sprang their hope, while the sun moved deep in the west.

"Maybe he won't come."

"Maybe he's scared out."

"Maybe he's left the country."

"We'll wait a while longer," Duke said.

The sun sank beyond the edge of the brooding swamps. The Prophet had not arrived.

"Are we just going to sit here?"

There was defiance in the question. The first show of defiance Duke had seen. Without analyzing, he decided to capitalize on it. "We'll go after him. We'll go to the shack."

Soon torches blazed and the landing was lit from end to end. "We'll go up and wade the shallows!" someone called out, and soon a line of torches was winding through the swamp.

Duke had no great difficulty in keeping up because the line, of necessity, moved slowly. A full two hours passed before the torch parade broke out into the open land by the marsh and surrounded the lonely shack.

There had been shouts of defiance and encouragement during the march. Now all was quiet as courage ebbed before the unseen menace that had

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cowed them for so long. The circle closed in slowly.

Until it could tighten no more; until leadership was silently called for.

Duke took a torch from the closest man and moved toward the closed door of the shack. "Wait," he called. "All of you."

There was no dissent. Duke reached the door and his hand closed over the knob. Before he could open it, there was a rush of footsteps. He turned. Kathie.

"I'm going in with you. I won't let you go alone."

Duke grinned. "All right. I have a feeling there's nothing to fear inside. But stay behind me." He opened the door and walked inside.

THERE WAS a moment of darkness before the torch lit the single room, and during that moment Duke regretted his courage. During that moment he admitted to himself that he was not an inherently brave man, and that if he'd made a mistake this time he would die. The Prophet could still cow the people outside. He could kill Duke and no hand would be raised to fend him off. Their courage was as false as that of Duke himself.

Then the room was alive with torchlight and Duke's fear turned to a chill.

He and Kathie would always remember the sight that met their eyes. Stretched upon the floor, spread wide upon his back, lay the Prophet—an unhappy madman, dead by his own hand. A warped and powerful brain come finally against solid agony too great to bear. The shotgun blast had left little of that brain.

But the Prophet was noted by Duke and Kathie only in passing. The center of interest was the figure on the rear wall. A figure crucified. A man bound wrist and ankle to the beams supporting the wall, starved, beaten, emaciated.

Dead.

And a terrible death it had been—a punishment far too great for any crime conceivable to any man—except the Prophet.

"Now I get it," Duke muttered. "Now that it's laid out in front of me, I get it."

Kathie shuddered and strove for words that wouldn't come.

"I did the old man an injustice. I said it was money. Maybe he was mad. But at least he kept his madness pure right to the end."

"His son?"

"Of course—his son. Call them in."

THERE WAS a new atmosphere at the landing. A brighter sun flashed down through the trees. The children shouted in their play. The people moved about with all tenseness gone.

Duke lay under a magnolia with Kathie seated beside him tickling his ear. "I went off base because that writer knew something I didn't. He evidently did a little research into that news story before he wrote the screen treatment. He found out one of the suspected bank mob came from the swamp country. That's why he wrote about the truck coming to the swamps. How was I to know the Prophet's son went bad?"

Kathie picked a blade of grass and tickled Duke's nose. "The writer didn't know that either."

"No, he didn't. That's why he didn't have the Prophet in his script. He had his mobster come down here and ditch the truck, which was exactly what happened in the real story that went a lot further. The Prophet's son, after getting in trouble with the mob and killing some of them, got away

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with the truck and came home to Dad."

"I wonder why he did that? I should think he'd have been ashamed."

"He did it because he was yellow. When the going got tough he came to his Dad for help."

Kathie shuddered. "He didn't know he was coming home to a maniac."

"He paid for his crimes. The Prophet saw to that. God! I wonder how long he hung there—dying?"

"Let's not talk about it. Let's talk about us. We're going to leave here, aren't we?"

"I guess so. But we'll have to walk. We've got no money."

"We'll find the nearest town and wire for some."

"Anything you say, darling." Duke pulled her head down and kissed her.

They found a town, but they didn't wire for money. Just why, they never quite knew. It might have been the MAN WANTED sign in a gas station they came to. There was a cabin for the man, and it wasn't too hard—with help short—to wangle an advance for a marriage license and a week's provisions.

Then there was the old Ford the owner gave Duke. It needed a lot of work and there was no time to send wires.

Duke did a pretty good job on the car, and he liked the gas station. But he knew he couldn't stay there forever, with Kathie continually nipping at him.

But he didn't want to wire Hollywood, so they compromised. They got in the Ford and started up the coast.

A hundred miles north another job got in the way. A bigger station needed a mechanic. Duke asked for the job and got it. Then there was nothing to do but stick around and find out if he had what it took to hold it down. Kathie was annoyed, but the lunch counter offered a chance to keep busy. She went to work as a waitress, but only to get enough money to reach Hollywood. Somehow, the idea of wiring for funds had been discarded.

"After all," Duke said, "who in Hollywood would want to send us any money—be glad to do it, I mean. Just think how you'd feel if we got turned down?"

THEY ACCUMULATED quite a bankroll before Kathie got them on the road again. This time they made New York City and went to a good hotel without feeling any pinch. They came in during the afternoon, took their time dressing and dining, and then went out and walked down Broadway. At 42nd Street, Kathie stopped dead and pointed. "Look!"

It was a huge marquee above which, in letters several feet high, were the words, *"The Spectre of Suicide Swamp"*.

"Duke—it's a Broadway opening. Our picture!"

They pushed through the crowd and got to the inner ropes just as a limousine drove up.

"There they are—we are," Duke said. Somehow, he wasn't excited. It was almost as though he'd always known it would be like this.

Tom Lewit and Ginny Hays got out of the limousine and walked up the red carpet. Ginny was radiant. Tom was handsome. Ginny stopped, graciously, to bestow autographs. She stood not ten feet from Duke and Kathie.

"What can we do!" Kathie whispered. "They're—they're getting away with it! Shall we call a cop?"

"Don't be silly. You want to get put in the funny house?"

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"Then there's—nothing we can do."

"I think there's a way."

"What is it?"

"Things won't snap back of their own accord—never again—but all you have to do is touch that girl. I'm sure of it. Touch her and something will happen to straighten things out."

Smiling, Ginny moved closer. Kathie's hand went out. Ginny pressed by. Kathie jerked her hand back quickly. Ginny went on into the theater.

"I—I couldn't," she whispered.

"Look at *him*," Duke said. "The poor devil. I know how he feels."

"Duke—I just couldn't do it."

"Couldn't what?"

"Touch her."

"You didn't want to?"

"When it came right down to it, I guess I—I didn't want to."

"I didn't—think you would."

"But Duke—do you think it would have worked?"

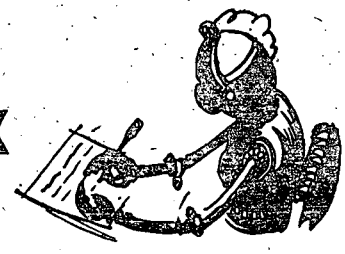
He grinned. "You know my hunches."

Kathie squeezed his arm. "I'm not used to you, even yet. Let's go back to the hotel."

So they did.

THE END

ROBOTS GO FOR PAPERWORK



By John Booth

WITH THE rapid automatization of industry, with machines spilling out goods in such abundane, with men relegated more and more to positions of machine-tending, it is no wonder that records, files, and paperwork are consuming an ever larger share of effort. Today, in many industries, it is not uncommon to find one office worker for every two or three shopworkers, a proportion which would have seemed ridiculous to managers of even thirty or forty years ago. When mass production on a vast scale takes place, an equally vast expansion occurs in the effort necessary to keep track of things, i.e., paperwork.

The white-collar worker exists today in vast numbers. Look at any city and you see this. But the conclusion you might draw as regards the future is very likely wrong. If anything, the future is going to show a decrease in the number of office workers—and for a simple reason—machinery again!

A minor revolution is occurring in offices. The introduction of automatic office machinery ranging from filing equipment to printing equipment, has changed the complexion of office work. Now electronic machines, variations of the famous computers, are putting in their appearance. It is possible to obtain a completely automatic machine today which will record the hours of work, keep accurate track of output, compute paychecks, arrange for all dedutions, and in short do everything but spend the earned money!

This state of affairs is certain to end in the same direction toward which ordinary industrial effort is tending—toward more and more automatization. Fewer and fewer people will need to do the brain-numbing routine drudgery which constitutes so much of general office work.

The compartmentalization of labor is proceeding at a brisk rate. Nowadays hardly any operation is so difficult or complex that it cannot be broken down into a series of simple facts which may be handled with ease by almost totally unskilled workers. And with this technique, of course, comes a vast flood of increased production, so that our capacity to produce far exceeds our capacity to consume. We aren't truly aware of this because of war and defense preparations but, under complete security and peacetime conditions, we will rapidly become aware of the necessity for alloting working time at a much lower rate. We have now more leisure than we know what to do with—and still more is coming.

The paperwork robot is very closely responsible for this new state of affairs in which the tedium of trivial jobs is rapidly being taken over by steel brains and fingers which do not tire or become bored. The millenium is here!

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MIRACLE... IN GLASS

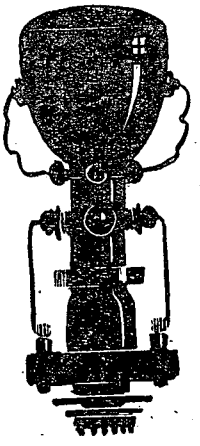
By E. BRUCE YACHES

THOUGH television is now so commonplace as to elicit no wonder at all, it still remains one of the greatest miracles of the age. Because the rise of TV is so recent and hence so familiar, there is no need to review the events that led up to its inception—with one exception. This exception is a perfect example of how theory precedes accomplishment. Often it is the other way around, but not in this case. The object we are talking about is the cathode ray tube, or "CRT", as it is often called.

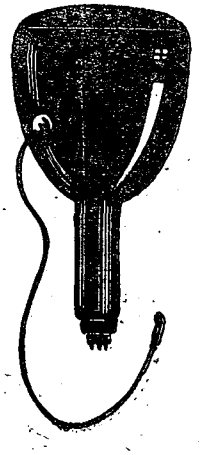
The cathode ray tube is what made television and radar, as we know them, possible. It is the ultimate development in the vacuum-tube maker's art. And like all fundamental technological ideas it was around a long time before it was applied to television techniques. Its story begins back in the eighteen-eighties with the discovery of the electron by J. J. Thompson. Then Pluecker, a German physicist, discovered that the end of the vacuum tube against which the electrons struck, fluoresced or glowed. His compatriot Braun devised a system of controlling this stream of cathode rays or electrons with small plates located in the tube on which were applied electric charges.

That happened in eighteen ninety-seven. From that time until about the nineteen-thirties, the cathode ray tube was a scientific step-child, extremely useful for certain types of research work but of little value in industry. Cathode ray tubes were delicate, complicated gadgets requiring a scientist to operate them. But then, during the thirties, a familiar name, Allen Dumont, entered the picture and that whole picture changed radically.

Dumont set out to build cathode ray tubes on a large scale from humble beginnings, determined to make use of the enormous potentialities of the instrument, realizing that the CRT could show things and be of such use as science alone could guess at. In addition, he had his eye on a field which appeared to be just around the corner—television. In any event, after constructing two simple cathode ray tubes and their associated apparatus, Dumont and his co-workers began to sell their use to industry and up until the beginning of the second World War, cathode ray tubes were beginning to find their way into every conceivable application of applied science.



Then came the War. Dumont produced CRT's for radar and for industry. Soon he was the acknowledged master of his field. And after the War, when television burgeoned, Dumont, of course, was right up there. The point of the whole discussion is that Dumont recognized the incredible value of this tool long before TV had been thought of seriously, and thus when it did come into being, the most important part of TV, the CRT, was ready. Theory had prepared the necessary instrument, the CRT.



Very often it is the other way around, as has been mentioned. Industry comes up with the right answers. But in this case, the new infant industry which has grown to be such a giant in such a short time, found that the thing it needed most was waiting for it at the right time!

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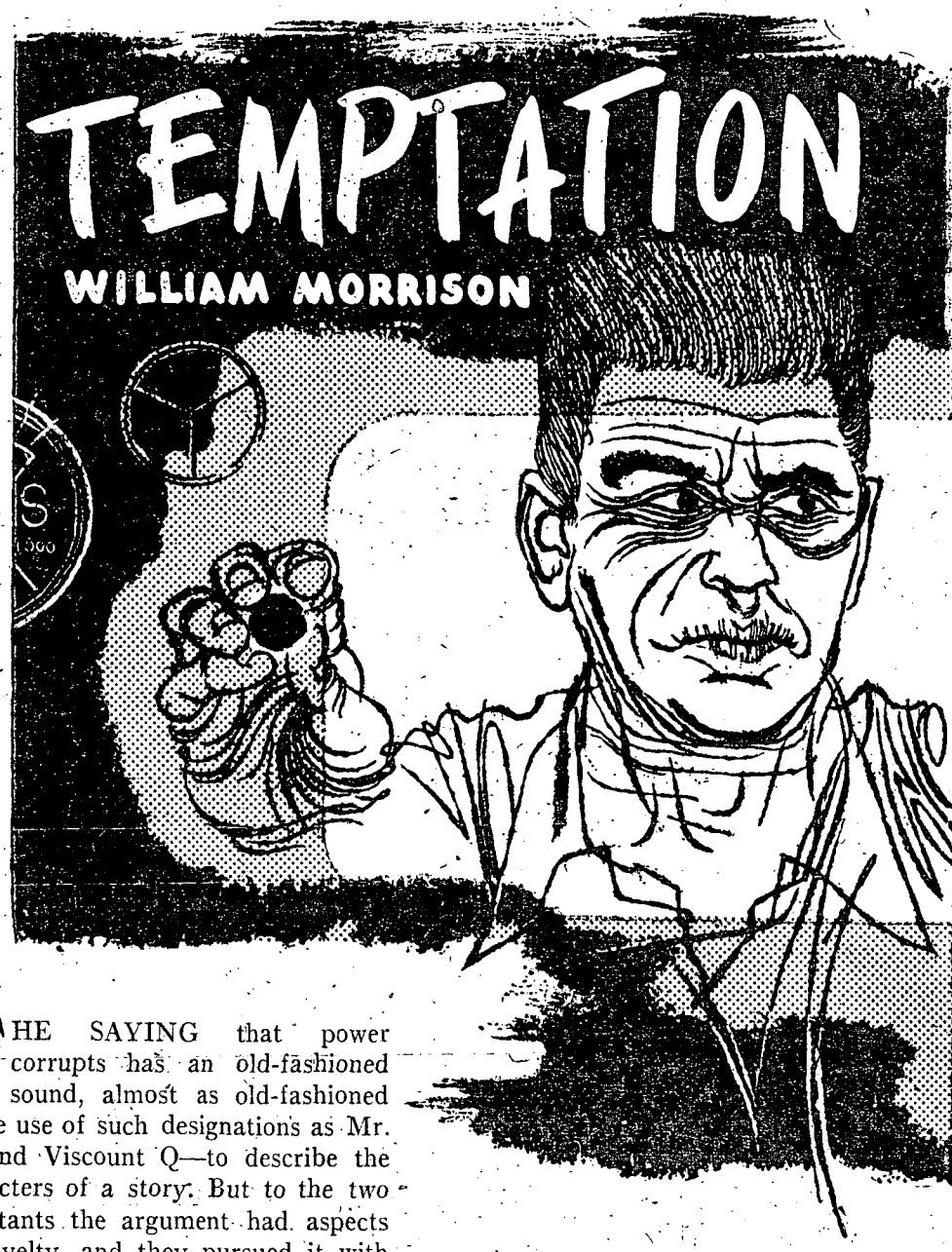
TEMPTATION

WILLIAM MORRISON



THE SAYING that power corrupts has an old-fashioned sound, almost as old-fashioned as the use of such designations as Mr. X—and Viscount Q—to describe the characters of a story. But to the two disputants the argument had aspects of novelty, and they pursued it with great seriousness.

"Lord Acton stated it first," said X—. "And since his time it has been considered a significant law of human nature."

"Nonsense," retorted Q—. "A mother and father have power over their infant children. Does that corrupt them? As a matter of fact, I think you have somewhat distorted the original statement. *Absolute* power, said Acton, is the thing that corrupts, not merely power in general. But even this is not true. Is a man corrupted because he has such power over the dog that crouches at his feet,

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It was only when he passed his test with flying colors that Peter der Meeren's failure was complete

An entire universe was at his mercy. How much power did he really want?

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or the cat that curls up on his sofa?"

"Your examples are badly chosen. In neither case is the power absolute, simply because the individuals you cite are like most human beings, restrained by the laws of the society in which they live. Only that power is absolute which makes its own laws, which can grant life or inflict death without fear of punishment or hope of reward."

"Of course, no one on Earth has ever had quite such power as that."

"I wonder," said X—, "what would happen if someone *did* have it?"

IF YOU had told Peter der Meeren that some day he would wield absolute power, that he would be able to say to this one, "Live," and this one would live, and to another, "Die," and that one would die—he would have thought you crazy.

He had never dreamed of such power and he had no desire to possess it. All he wanted was to be a good research physicist.

He lived in a small rooming house, all by himself, in a single room. Some of the other inmates of the old building were less lonely. Down the hall was a three-room apartment shared by two girls whom he saw in the hallway for about a minute at a time twice a week, and on the floor above there lived a pair of young students whom he had seen in the University library. Neither with these nor with any of the other roomers was he on intimate terms. It was not really that he was shy. It was chiefly that he had little time for social life—little time and practically no money. He would have enjoyed being able to relax once in a while, and he would have wanted to be better acquainted with the girls. But he had heard that here, as in his native Holland, girls liked to have you show your fondness for them in very material ways. And even as it was, his small income barely covered his expenses for food and clothing.

So he kept to himself and his work. At the age of twelve he had escaped from Rotterdam after the first terrible bombing and made his way to England. He had lived and worked in England during the war and for the first two years after, and then he had gone to the United States. Here, while working part time, he had been able to continue the studies he had begun in England, and he had secured his degree. Now, with a fellowship that paid him barely enough to subsist on, he was continuing his research.

He had one of those unimportant problems that young graduate students usually work on, and once a week he was supposed to consult with one of his professors. But the man was usually too busy to devote much time to him, and for the most part Peter was on his own.

He did not mind. From day to day he mulled over his calculations and added to his apparatus, and made changes, and prepared to make the trivial measurements that would some day be published as a short paper in one of the research journals and help him in getting a higher degree.

THERE CAME a day, however, when things did not go as usual. Early that evening he was returning from the laboratory, upset by what had happened, when he almost ran into one of the girls on the stairway. He excused himself politely, and she smiled and said, "It was my fault. I wasn't looking where I was going."

He realized now that she was a very pretty girl. And it struck him too that perhaps she was just as lonely as he was. She showed no desire to hurry on. She said, "You're a student, aren't you?"

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"I am a graduate student. My subject is physics."

"That's one thing I hate," she said frankly. "I could never understand it. Do you really enjoy studying that stuff?"

"Of course."

"It would drive me crazy."

"Sometimes it has the same effect on me," agreed Peter politely.

"Don't you ever do anything to forget it? Like going to a movie once in a while?"

"Not very often," he said guardedly.

"There's a pretty fair show at the local theatre. Double feature, and both features are supposed to be good. Why don't we go together?" She saw him hesitate, and added quickly, "Dutch, of course."

"Dutch? I am from Holland myself. You mean that one of the pictures was made there?"

"No, you don't understand. I mean we'd each pay our own way."

"Oh. I was intending to work tonight. Still, after what happened in the laboratory today, I do not feel—yes, perhaps it would be a good idea for me to go."

"That's wonderful. Look, why not have dinner with me and Helen—that's my roommate?"

"Oh, no. I could not do that."

"Why not? It'll be ready in about an hour. And then we can go right to the show. By the way, my name is Maxine. What's yours?"

"Peter," he said, wondering whether other American girls were as direct as this. "Peter der Meeren."

"So long, Peter. See you in an hour."

When he got to his own room, he wondered what had happened to him. Still, it was nothing to regret. It would be pleasant having dinner with others, instead of by himself in the inexpensive restaurant he patronized. Maxine must have understood how he would feel. She was not only pretty, she was tactful. She had evidently realized that he had little money to spare, and had taken the trouble to show that it made no difference to her.

HE FELT that he couldn't just come to dinner without showing her how much he appreciated the invitation. A short time before the hour was up, he ran outside. A few moments later, when he knocked at her door, he was carrying a box of chocolates.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Maxine, but he could see that she was pleased.

The dinner was a great success. For the first time in many years he felt that he had found a genuine friend, some one to whom he could talk. Helen was as pretty as her roommate, but more reserved. And she was tactful enough not to take too large a part in the conversation that was clearly the concern of Maxine and Peter.

The pictures at the local theatre were both good, and afterward they returned to the apartment, where Helen was reading a book and acting involuntarily as chaperone. The girls had coffee and cake, and Peter had the tea he had grown to like in England. Later, when he was talking to Maxine alone, he felt an urge to tell her what had upset him.

"You see," he said, "I have been working on the problem six months. And today, for the first time, I found a mistake in the calculations."

"Oh, that's too bad."

"You do not understand. In physics everything that one does is based on the work some one else has done. The mistake is in the calculations of

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the man who went before me. And if the true calculations are as I think they are—then it is impossible to do what I have been trying to do."

"You mean that all your work is wasted?"

"Much of it. However, the apparatus may still be of value. It is an unusual television hookup."

"Television? Get any good programs?"

"It is not for programs, although I wish it were. In my own room I can afford only a very inexpensive radio, but in the laboratory I use the University's equipment, and the television setup is necessary to make observations where it would be dangerous for me to look with my own eyes."

"Now I see."

"Good. Well, if my new calculations are correct, I can use the same apparatus for a very strange purpose. It is so very strange... However, I do not want to say anything about it before I try."

"I bet I wouldn't understand anyway," said Maxine with a smile.

"Yes, you would. But you would not believe. When I told my professor that the man before me had made a mistake, he did not believe. He was too busy to waste time on me, and he said merely, 'Check your calculations again.' But I had already done so five times. I am sure I am right."

"I don't know whether to say it's wonderful or not."

"Neither do I," said Peter frankly. "Before, I was upset. It is always upsetting to find a mistake. But now I think I am glad that it has turned out this way. That comes of spending an evening with you, Maxine. You have been of great help to me. I feel very much better."

"You can't have had a better time than I've had."

"I am pleased. Now I can return to my work with new energy."

"Are you doing anything tomorrow night?"

"But of course!" said Peter, with surprise. "As I say, I shall work with new energy. I shall spend all day and tomorrow evening rearranging my apparatus. I shall be busy many evenings."

"You can't work *all* the time!" said Maxine.

"For a while I must. This is very important. But do not fear," said Peter. "Now that I know you, I shall not let you escape me. I shall see you again soon."

But it was not to be too soon. Helen had put aside her book and gone to bed in her room. Peter kissed Maxine goodnight, then tore himself away. He must be up early tomorrow, he thought. He must get to work at once and see if his new calculations were correct.

HE WORKED all the next day and the day after and even the month after. It was a long time before he saw Maxine again for more than a moment. She had once more invited him to dinner, but for days on end Peter didn't come home from the laboratory until late at night. When finally he came home early one evening, she found him exhausted. This time she insisted that he have dinner with them, and he agreed.

He ate slowly and dreamily, as if tired, but there was a look of triumph on his face that Maxine couldn't help noticing. "You look like the cat that swallowed the canary," she said.

"The cat? Oh, I understand, I recall that I have heard it before. It is an expression. Yes, that is the way I feel. What I have done is something every researcher dreams about.

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I have discovered a new phenomenon, something completely unheard of."

"Is it important?"

"Important? It will make my name famous, as famous as Einstein's."

Maxine looked incredulous. "You're joking."

"I swear I am not. In fact, this is so important that I have told no one of it. Not even my professor. I wish to be sure first."

"Is it practical? Or is it just a theory?"

"That is a difficult question to answer," said Peter slowly. "Perhaps it is best to say that the answer depends on the point of view."

"That isn't very clear, you know."

"I know. But at present I fear to say more. I must do more work before I speak."

"Well, anyway, I'm glad to know it means so much to you."

Peter smiled at her. "It means more than you suspect to both of us. I shall be famous, perhaps rich. I shall be able to do many things I have only dared dream about."

He looked her straight in the eyes, and for the first time since he had known Maxine he saw her blush. He was delighted to find that she was not so cool and self-possessed as she had pretended to be.

But for that matter, neither was he. He had not been exaggerating when he told Maxine how important his discovery seemed to him. If anything, he had been understating it. The next morning, when he returned to his laboratory ready to work again, he did an unusual thing. He locked the door of his room to make sure he would not be interrupted.

THEN HE turned on the apparatus and waited. In a few moments a picture formed on the screen. It was a little blurred, but he could see clearly enough to know that it was like no scene on Earth.

The streets flowed in smooth arcs, the buildings were low, without sharp angles, and the clothes of the people were loose and billowing. Perhaps it was the clothes, perhaps it was the people themselves, but the effect was subtly unhuman. Nothing in the least repulsive or frightening or awe-inspiring, merely different from what he was accustomed to.

As he touched the tuning knobs, the scene blurred badly. He would have liked to enlarge the scale so as to get a better look at the people, but that seemed impossible. What he could do, however, was shift the scene slowly, to take in different streets, different buildings, different trees and plants. But no matter what the screen showed, the main conclusion remained the same. He was seeing something not on Earth.

Ordinary electromagnetic waves of the kind used in radio could be modulated, thus becoming in effect carriers for sound waves. In a similar way, he had found that four-dimensional waves, their existence hitherto unsuspected, could become carriers for light and other electromagnetic waves. In one of the scenes he saw tiny twin suns in the sky. He knew then that what he was viewing was taking place in no planet of the Solar System nor in the nearer stars. He had succeeded in tuning in directly on what was happening across reaches of space so vast that ordinary light might have taken centuries to traverse them.

When he had first begun to realize what he was doing, he had felt a strange, almost superstitious, fear, a fear of his own success. And then had followed the fear that he was mistaken, that he was going mad and only imagining so wildly improbable

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a result. Now, both fears had gone. Now he was sure of what he was doing and eager to develop further the results that would astound and excite not only scientific circles, but the vast mass of human beings who had hitherto never given a serious thought to the possibility that there might be inhabited worlds other than their own.

The viewing screen enabled him to see what was going on. But the rest of the apparatus was perhaps even more important. The great question was not whether he could see across galaxies, but whether he could act across them. Soon he would know.

HE WAS ALMOST ready to make the test now. He started to make final preparations, his hands fumbling nervously as he adjusted his circuits so that the resonance vibrations they would emit might be of maximum strength.

When finally he felt that everything was ready for trial, he had to pause for a moment to regain control of himself. This was no mood for a scientist, he said angrily to himself. He must be calm, cool, ready for whatever might happen, ready to hope for nothing, to be disappointed at nothing.

But his nervousness persisted, and he knew that it was not something to be talked away. Finally, disgusted with himself, he went ahead despite it. He slowly shifted the scene in the stretch of bare rounded hills, without signs of people or even of animal life. Then he sent a small surge of current through the resonance circuit.

The result was no more than he had hoped for, yet it sent a wave of elation through him. He saw the ground tremble and fall apart. He saw the center explode outward, the sides caving in as after an earthquake fault. Where there had been a gentle hill, he now perceived only a patch of rough and jagged rock.

He sat back, dried the perspiration off his forehead, and stared at the screen. The experiment had worked, he no longer had anything to be nervous about.

Now he shifted the scene slowly again until he found a street he had viewed before. The people seemed excited, moving around restlessly, as if news of some fearsome and unexpected event had reached them. Peter had the feeling that he had done something extremely funny. He had shifted his own nervousness to them, across uncounted light-years of space.

There was a limit to the extent to which he could move the scene. When he went too far in any direction, the blur was complete. With the present setting of his apparatus he could view only a small portion of this planet of the two suns. But he knew that, if he changed the constants, if he put in new resistances and inductances, he would be enabled to see the rest of the planet. He would see other planets, other suns. He would be able to scan an entire galaxy.

His eyes could penetrate across parsecs in an instant, the touch of his finger could make itself felt with devastating effect. It struck him suddenly that to these people he was a god, a god of death and destruction.

At this point a shudder passed through him and he turned off the current. As he sat there thinking, the scene died away.

HE HAD POWER, such as no man had ever before so much as dreamed of. He could destroy by little more than willing it. He could shatter the lives of these dwellers on a strange planet with more ease than if they were so many insects under his

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thumb. An insect might see the thumb coming and escape. His victims on this planet could not possibly know what was happening to them. The catastrophes that befell them must seem like the disasters of a nature they could not understand, the deeds of an inscrutable and all-powerful deity.

His power was, as he had told Maxine it would be, both theoretical and practical. To those whom he could destroy, it was practical enough. But for himself it was purely a theoretical matter. He could do nothing to control the world directly around him, the world on which his own happiness depended. When he sent a current through the resonance circuit, the repercussions were felt light years away, but not close at hand. He had the power itself, without being able to secure its benefits.

Or rather, he could secure no benefits—but those that flowed from the knowledge that he *had* power. The knowledge that the destiny of worlds lay in the palm of his hand.

It was too much to think about in so narrow a room. He left the labratory, locking the door again behind him, and made his way into the street. As he crossed at the corner, a speeding car nipped at his heels, and he felt a surge of anger. "Careful, you fool," he thought. "You are playing with fire. You are getting reckless with a god!"

A god, he thought, who lacked money enough to live decently. Never, he realized with painful suddenness, never in all the years since he had left Holland, had he felt his poverty so keenly. He lived in a single small room, he ate sparingly and not of the food he enjoyed, he wore clothes that had long since seen better days. No primitive race would have treated its idols as badly as he had been treated.

It was an absurd situation. If those worlds had known about him, those worlds whose destiny he now controlled so completely, they would have composed countless hymns in his praise, they would have lavished their choicest possessions upon him in freewill offerings, they would have sacrificed their sons and daughters to win his favor. Unfortunately, he could only make his existence felt by them, not known to them. And he could confer no blessings upon them. At best, he could only withhold disasters. And he had no way of taking to himself the things they would have offered.

His face must have betrayed a disagreeable bitterness, for as a man collided with him, Peter heard a gruff, muttered, "Why don'tcha watch where you're goin'?" His anger flared in a way that it had never done before at such encounters. If he had seen the man on his screen, his finger would have moved and the man would have died.

HE REALIZED now that he was resenting things he had never resented before. The bark of the traffic policeman as he tried to cross without waiting for the light to change, the impudence of a boy who rode into his path on a bicycle, the bird-brained stupidity of the pigeons who almost walked under his feet and then flapped their wings in his face as they took sudden alarm and flew away. If he could have done so, he would have destroyed them all.

But he could not reach them, he could only reach the people on this other planet. Well, what made him think that these nonhuman creatures were any more worth keeping alive than the human beings he had known? It was probable, almost certain, that they possessed just such stupid and

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unpleasant traits as had helped the human race make a shambles of its own planet. He himself had been a long-time victim of stupidity and selfishness. Now he could revenge himself on stupidity and selfishness, without fear of punishment.

He found himself walking back from the street toward the laboratory, a little warm from the active pace he had set, but thinking with no more clarity than before. He would be like a child playing with tin soldiers. Set them up and knock them down, set them up and knock them down—he caught himself. He could only knock them down. He couldn't set them up again.

He let himself into his laboratory and turned on the apparatus once more. This time he put in a new resistance, and then he focused the screen on a flat, pocked surface that was boiling with such heat that he almost had the illusion of feeling it radiate from the screen. It was the surface of some distant star. He watched the small pockmarks grow and explode and then form again elsewhere, and realized that he was watching a phenomenon that an astrophysicist would have given his right arm to see. The surface was a hot gas composed of stripped atoms and free electrons, the pockmarks were eddies of atomic nuclei and electrons. He touched a lever, and two of the eddies exploded at once. Here there was no living person to be harmed, but here too his power could reach.

He began to scan ever wider and wider areas, and finally, putting in the old resistance again, he found one with the same people he had seen before. Almost without realizing what he was doing, his finger moved toward the lever. It had been a long time since he had played with toy soldiers. There would be a wonderful feeling in knocking them down, even if they couldn't be set up again, especially as these toy soldiers were not machines, but had reactions of their own to being knocked down.

His finger moved, and then stopped as if paralyzed. These were not toy soldiers, they were people! They valued their lives as much as he valued his own. He had no right to make them his toys.

BUT THE temptation to do so did not disappear. Instead it grew, until he felt a hunger to destroy that was almost physical. All the bitterness of his life, the bitterness of seeing his native city bombed, of living in exile and without friends, everything flared to the surface in an urge to kill and revenge himself. He had a feeling that if he kept staring at the screen his finger would move toward the lever again with a will of its own, one that he would be unable to thwart. His muscles tensed so hard with the mad desire to destroy that they ached. Soon they would be beyond his control.

He muttered hoarsely to himself, and quickly shifted the scene again, back to the star he had viewed before. Then he let himself go. He touched off explosion after explosion, all of them harmless, all tearing up the gaseous surface of a star which was too vast to be greatly affected by the power of even such an apparatus as he controlled.

Afterward, feeling that some of the tension had gone out of him, he turned off the current and went home. He felt exhausted, as if he had lived through years of a drawn-out and nerve-racking experience. When he reached his room, he fell into bed and dropped off to sleep. He did not awaken to eat. Once he thought he heard the bell sound and he sensed

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vaguely that some one, probably Maxine, was ringing, but he did not get up to answer.

In the morning he felt rested and it seemed to him that he could think more clearly. He said to himself, "Peter, you are a fool. You have seen the possibilities of this thing. Why are you so stupid as to forget them? It is silly to say that you cannot benefit by your discovery. You have but to make it known to the world, as you yourself have realized, and you will be hailed as the greatest discoverer of the ages. Praise, honors, money—all will be yours. What more can you want?"

What more indeed? That morning, instead of turning on the apparatus, he spent in day-dreaming about what the recognition of success would mean to him. He saw the awed faces of his fellow students, the involuntary respect of his professors, the shrewd faces of business men trying to enlist his brains in their service, the unthinking cheering of crowds who knew nothing of science. When he went out to have lunch, he was still dreaming. He ordered recklessly, and paid twice as much as he knew he could afford. But what was an extra dollar or two to a man who ruled the destiny of galaxies and would soon have endless wealth poured into his lap?

IT WAS ONLY after lunch, when he turned on the current again and viewed the screen once more that he realized what he had forgotten. His tin soldiers were still there, still small and helpless, waiting to be knocked down. And his hand, his entire body, pulsed with the desire to knock them down, to use the power that was his, to shatter them to bits.

So far he had resisted it—but would others resist? That was the question. If he made known his discovery he would be putting that same power into the hands of every human being on earth. He would be putting it into the hands of every fool, every hater of humanity, every person whose frustration and desire for revenge had previously been bottled up, and now found an unexpected outlet.

He would be putting it into the hands of other scientists, too. Soon they would certainly discover what so far he had overlooked. They would learn how to shorten the range, so that they could exert their power not only on unhuman societies in distant galaxies, but here on earth, on human beings like themselves. They would turn it into an instrument of war, as they had turned fire and the steam engine, and the wonders of chemistry and electricity and nuclear power, and the healing science of bacteriology, and all the other gifts that man had wrested from nature in the course of ages. And what the other weapons had only begun, this would end. It would finally destroy the human race.

But the destruction would take time. And meanwhile Peter der Meeren would enjoy all that any human being could want of fame and fortune. Until the fatal day when he fell victim to his own discovery, he could have everything that any man could want.

He saw the situation with real clarity now. The power to tear down—but no real power to build up. Only a temporary benefit to himself, short-lived acclaim as a great discoverer, and then undying hate as the greatest of destroyers.

He took a deep breath, and let it out with a painful sigh. Then he began slowly to disconnect the apparatus. He removed those parts that he had made especially for his own

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purposes and ground them under foot. He found the notebooks in which he had made his calculations and tore the sheets out of them and held them in the flame of a Bunsen burner with a pair of tongs until the last scrap had been consumed. Then he ground the ashes into a gray powder and flushed them down the drain.

After he had done all this, he sat down at his desk with his head in his hands and wept bitterly. He had not cried since the day he had been bombed and terrified in Rotterdam. But even then, as a mere boy, he had not shed such tears as he shed now. Never before, he thought sadly, had anyone faced such temptation as this, and resisted victoriously.

When he left the laboratory, however, he was quite calm. The episode was ended.

THAT EVENING, when Maxine rang his bell, he opened the door. She said, "Were you home last night? I tried to wake you up, but there was no answer."

He nodded slowly. "I was home, but I was not feeling good."

"Why didn't you tell me? I hate to think of you lying here sick and helpless. How do you feel now?"

"I feel better. Much better."

"You still look pale. Peter, dear, why don't you see a doctor?"

"He cannot help me. The trouble is—it is my work. It is not going well."

"I'm sorry, Peter."

"I was so sure I had not made a mistake, was I not? I told you that I would be as great as Einstein, that I would be famous. Oh, there are many things that I told you. But I was wrong. All wrong. It is I who made the mistake."

She put her hand on his arm. "Don't be so upset about it, darling. I know how you feel, but—try not to think about it. Let's have dinner together, and I'll talk so much nonsense you won't have time to think of anything serious. And then we'll go to see some double feature that includes a good comedy, and maybe you'll begin to forget."

"Thank you, Maxine. You—you are not disappointed that I have failed?"

"Of course I'm disappointed—for your sake. But you're just beginning your career, Peter. What does one failure matter? You'll have plenty of successes before you're finished."

"Yes, that may be true. Still, there will never be a success like this failure. Never," he said quietly.

X—, OR TO give him his full name, Xarion, smiled and said, "You see? There is one man whom power has not corrupted. I think that, if we looked, we should find others too."

"You would find the corruptible kind as well," replied Quettor.

"It takes all kinds to make a world, as these human beings themselves say. But we begin with the good ones, those who think of others as well as of themselves."

Quettor nodded. "Most naturally. And in our report we shall recommend—"

"Their preservation, of course. The race is far from perfect, but it is perfectible."

"Some day we shall have to let him know. Some day he must understand how true his words are: 'There will never be a success like this failure.' Some day he will realize that his failure has been a test which he has passed with flying colors, that it has led to a favorable decision for the entire human race."

"Yes, some day, not so far in the

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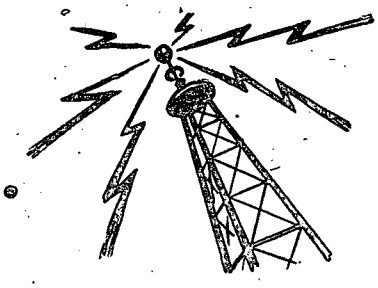
future." Xarion paced back and forth, in the small apartment directly over the room where Peter lived. "Then he will learn how we have controlled his motions, inspired his calculations, guided his construction of the apparatus. He will be amused, I think, when he learns that this planet of the two suns and these other scenes of distant galaxies are no more than stage settings on Mars, in which robot actors played their parts and awaited the harmless touch of his fingers. He will be amused to learn that in reality he never possessed the power to destroy."

"Perhaps. But I do not think he will be at all amused when he learns that our own scientists, from their distant galaxy, actually do possess it," said Quettor, and sat down soberly to fill out his report.

THE END

AND THE MAN SAID . . .



By JUNE LURIE

AND THE man in the moon said, "What hath God wrought!"

At least, that's what it seemed that the man in the moon said. Actually, these four words—which were the same that Samuel Morse tapped out in the world's first telegraphic message—were received through a tremendous radio receiver at Sterling, Virginia. Pulses of energy signalling out the Morse code traveled hundreds of thousands of miles through empty space—from the Collins Radio Co. transmitter at Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to the Moon, to be bounced back to the National Bureau of Standards field station receiver at Sterling.

This is certainly proof that radio beams can pierce the electrified ionosphere anywhere from 60 to 220 miles up in the earth's atmosphere. Radio control of satellite space ships circling thousands of miles above the earth is now definitely possible. A radio system which would be independent of weather conditions on Earth may now be possible also.

LITTLE FLY UPON THE WALL

By SALEM LANE

THE COMMON house-fly is an adventurous type of fellow, as well as an ambitious one. He's been known to travel, on occasion, as far as eight miles in search of food. Flies move at random from any given point. When they detect food or breeding material, they invariably move in that direction. By hopping from one attractant to another, they cover considerable distances.

In a recent series of six tests which were made to aid the study of how disease is transmitted, more than 200,000 radioactive flies were released. Many of them turned up later at various distances from the release points.

"Hot" flies—those tagged with small amounts of radioisotopes—can easily be picked out with a Geiger counter. The radioisotopes give off radiation. Using this, the scientists trace them through complicated chemical and biological processes.

The removal of breeding sources is one of the points stressed by fly-control programs. That, and for communities to dispose of attractants. Otherwise, it has been found that flies will come into a place from an adjacent locale to find food and breeding areas. Their relation to food contamination seems obvious enough.

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AND THE MONSTERS WALK

By John Jakes

While Scotland Yard watched the hands of Big Ben, London was menaced by a terrifying demon from another time — and even the fog smelled of death

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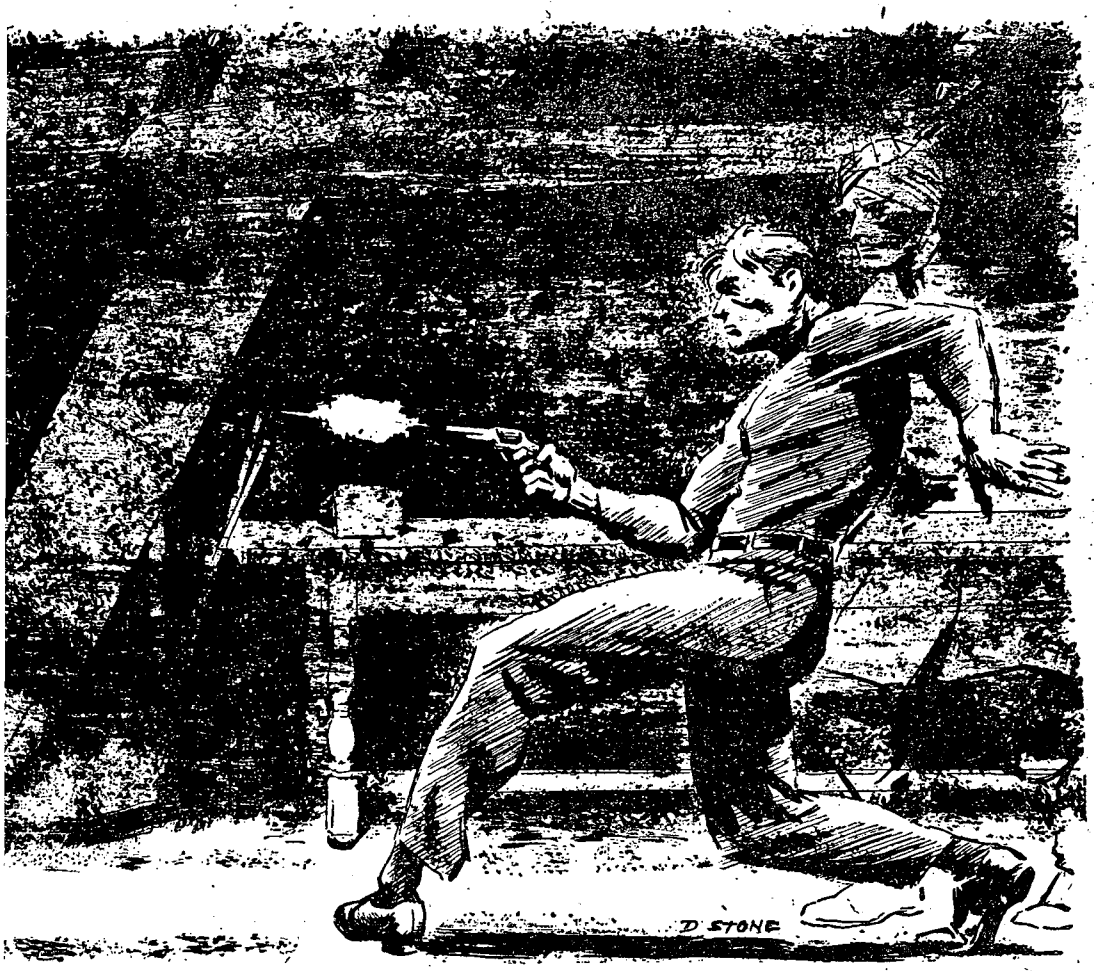

I shot at his legs, but they weren't there. He was only a torso!

WE WERE somewhere in the Channel, with France lying to starboard and the country of England on the other hand. Both were lost in the fog and darkness of that impenetrable night. The freighter *Queen of Madagascar* rolled on the oily swells, and hundreds of gallons of water thundered across the lonely decks with each rise and fall.

The ship was a ship of strangers. The men were not English or American or even European. They were odd hues: swarthy, some of them, others yellowish with the cast of the Orient. At mess I sat alone, an Englishman working my way homeward by the only trade I knew—the sea.

And here we were, that strange, murderous crew with the slashed scarred faces, the dark furtive eyes, the pistols and the knives. One day out from England. Twenty-four hours. And my curiosity had risen to a fever pitch. I had to know what we carried in that sealed main hold. Once, off Algiers, when the hatch was open, I caught a whiff from down there. Standing in the bright sun, I swear it was a smell of bones and age. A smell of dead men. The vague thought of our being a monstrous coffin-ship intrigued me, played on my curiosity—a

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characteristic in me which, if not particularly worthy, provided for a life that was far from dull.

There was an opening into the main hold from a lower deck. Not a regular entrance-way or anything of the like. A makeshift iron door, probably cut from the bulkhead by a torch and refitted into its original frame.

No one guarded that door, you see. On our first day out, Captain Bezahrov had informed the crew that the penalty for entering the hold was instantaneous death. But there I was, crazy with curiosity, and yet lucky, too. Because what I found gave me knowledge that more important men longed for—later. Lucky, in a hellish sort of a way.

I stole through the rocking corridors, finished with my watch. From the faraway forecastle, echoing through the dismal metal halls, came a wordless primitive song. One of the crewmen singing of his homeland, probably. It counterpointed the thunder of the waves in the black sea outside, and made my spine crawl.

I listened for a few moments, hesitating before the door. No footsteps sounded. No voices spoke anywhere near. Carefully, I eased the crude handle upward and inched the door open. It was well oiled. It made no sound.

THE HOLD was dark. At once, that overpowering stench of age and evil decay struck me. I stepped inside, inserting my penknife to keep the door open. I had nothing to lose. I don't mean that in a bragging sense. A life is certainly something to part with. But no wife, no children to care for. And curiosity burned high and insistent. There was just enough of an element of chance. I just *might* get away with it....

I flicked on my pocket torch and looked around. My chest heaved with excitement. They *did* look like coffins! Row on row of rough wooden boxes. I stepped closer and peered at the markings. *T. Nedros, Importer, 8 Ryster Lane, London, England.* I checked several of the strange packing cases. The address was always the same. All of them to this mysterious T. Nedros, Importer.

The boxes had lids, and those lids were only fastened down with cheap wire. What more could I ask? Holding my torch steady, I unwound the twists of wire and pushed back the lid. I leaned forward to peer at the contents.

And then the nightmare began.

I looked into that box for perhaps forty-five seconds. It couldn't have been longer. But what I saw could easily drive a man mad. A...a *shape*—could I call it that?—lay within. Nearly seven feet in length, I realized, estimating the length of the box. A shape in human form, but not human at all. A shadow shape, with monstrous furred hands and a blur of darkness for the head, in which burned two smoky red eyes, wide open, staring up blankly at the roof of the hold.

A...a *thing*, it was. A creature from some more ancient world, when spirits of evil trod the earth. A creature not of our time, not of the world of civilized men. A demon reshaped in human mold, dug from God knows what sorcerer's burying ground and boxed up and—this was the most horrible—loaded on a ship for London! The others must contain the same sort of monstrosity, I realized.

I retched dryly. The death-smell filled my nostrils.

All that in forty-five seconds or less, flashing through my brain like flickering pictures on a screen. Like a man seeing his entire life in the moment before he dies. And I was dying then, in a sense. Dying and being re-

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born into a world of terrors unfit for humans to endure.

QUICKLY, then, the rest happened. I heard the sounds of the door, of feet clanging on the metal plates, of harsh foreign curses. Hands threw me quickly to the floor. I peered up. Lights had come on in the hold.

Captain Bezahrov stood over me, hands clenched in fury. "Marlow," he said quietly, holding his teeth together in rage, "you are a fool. You should have known that we would be wise enough to prepare an alarm system on the bridge for something as important as this."

I said nothing. From far away came the wild and lonely drumming of the sea. My only chance was to make a break for it. With an effort, I sprang to my feet.

Bezahrov caught me when I was only half-risen. He towered above me, his round face jerked awry by the livid scar lying alongside his nose. A light far above him threw a dim halo around his cap, and I wondered how the Angel Satan had looked when he fell from Paradise.

Bezahrov's pistol came sweeping down, butt first. I tried to dodge, but it was no use. He hit me several times and, in a pain-filled delirium, I felt hands lift me and carry me. Upward. My brain screamed in fear. Upward. *The deck!*

But I had known the penalty. I had known, and they did not have to speak of it. Abruptly, I felt wind lashing my face, and a fine rain. The waves thundered more loudly. A few more steps. The hands lifted me. *Lifted . . .*

And then the hands were gone. I hung in space for a moment and then I fell like a plummet, without thought, straight down to the black raging waters of the Channel.

I struck the water and my mind went dark.

CHAPTER II

PATTERN FOR MADNESS

I HAD no knowledge of how I managed to come out of that angry sea alive. Slowly, I began to drift back into consciousness, stripes of gray light creeping across my eyes. I awoke as if from a pleasant sleep. I kept my eyes closed as the first coherent thoughts crossed my mind.

I recalled the thing in the box, and that same feeling of dread and loathing swept over me. And then I remembered the nightmare fall into the depths of the Channel. *By God, Marlow,* my mind said, *you have no right to be alive!*

But I was alive! That, or hell was a place to lie quietly between blankets. I opened my eyes. I felt no pain. My head was clear and my thoughts were orderly. Or as orderly as they could be, with the vision of what I had seen gnawing at the back of my mind.

The room was bleak, with only the bed, a washstand, a chair and a writing desk. I blinked with astonishment. Neat and dry, my clothes, complete to cap and pea jacket, hung on the back of the chair.

I got out of bed, feeling chill air on my naked body. Dressing hastily, I approached the window under the slanting roof and raised the blind. Outside lay a gray and dismal sky brooding over the desolate rooftops of London's East End.

Then I was in London, and alive! But *how?* Already the nightmare had begun to take shape. I started walking back and forth across the room, trying to find an answer. But there was no answer. Not even a logical puzzle. Just a series of mad, fright-

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ening events—random, inexplicable.

After a few moments I saw the piece of paper on the writing desk. I snatched it up and read the lines inked in a small, almost childishly untrained hand. The words only added to the madness surrounding me.

We are your friends, it ran. *Do not question the fact that you are alive. We will contact you.*

I stared at the paper and questions flooded over me again. I stopped after a moment. It was futile. Two immediate things could be done. I was in London. I could find out exactly where I was, and I could go to Scotland Yard and tell them of the things I had seen.

I LEFT the room, went down a short chilly hall, and downstairs into the main room of the lodging house. In the dim light, a fat, blowzy red-haired woman dozed at the desk.

"I'd like to know how I got here," I said to her, almost afraid to ask the question.

She looked at me out of eyes surrounded by fields of wrinkles, and laughed coarsely. "Don't ask me, mate. I suppose you like your nip too much, like most of them. Blind when they come in, and afterwards they all want to know how they got here."

"I wasn't drunk," I insisted. "Someone brought me here. When was it?"

"What's your name?"

"Marlow. Steven Marlow."

She consulted the spotted pages of the register. "Two nights ago. Monday."

"Who brought me here?" I repeated.

"How should I know that?" she said in an irritated manner. "I wasn't working then. Mr. Sudbury was here Monday night. He'd know who brought you in, I suppose." I could see from her face that she was still convinced I had come here in a drunken stupor.

"Then when can I talk to Mr. Sudbury?" I persisted.

"You can't," she said triumphantly. "He quit last night."

"Q—quit?" I stammered. The thing was becoming too confused even to think about.

"Yes, quit! Listen, matey, we don't ask questions around here. Mr. Sudbury only worked here three weeks. How do I know he wasn't wanted by the law? How do I know he didn't have some girl in trouble?" She threw up her hands. "I don't. But we don't ask questions, see. Why don't you just forget it and start off where you were before you got hold of the stuff?"

Angrily, I turned from the desk and walked out of the place. A sign above the door read *Bane's Rest.* Well, there wasn't any information to be had from the woman. I glared at her once through the window, leaning on her elbows, her frowzy red hair bobbing as she nodded off to sleep.

I turned and started off down the narrow street. I needed sanity. A touch of it, just a tiny bit of it.

Scotland Yard brought sanity to me. The office of Inspector Rohm, to whom I was sent after I gave many evasive answers to the question—for what did I need the Yard?—proved to be a bare little cubbyhole, not much more cheerful than the bedroom in which I had awakened.

INSPECTOR Rohm was a thin, scholarly-looking man with sandy hair, erect posture, and sharp blue eyes. He sat in his chair and listened to my story. I poured it all out, incoherently, even wildly, while he sat there as if listening to a learned paper on physics. The only part I omitted concerned the note from my rescuers, whoever they were.

When I finished, Inspector Rohm

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peered at me with his blue eyes and said, "Is that *all?*"

"Yes," I said, "and it's the truth."

Rohm laughed. "I doubt that," he said gently. "My friend, we are bothered with many cranks and lunatics here, but I have never heard such a fantastic story."

"But I saw the thing!" I exclaimed.

"Granted such creatures existed," he continued, "why would you come to us?"

And there he had me stopped. Why indeed? Except that I had sensed terrible evil in that thing on the ship, in all the cases in the hold, in fact. And evil had its opposite in good, and the law had unconsciously represented the nearest source of that good.

I could not convey to him in words the impending sense of danger and unearthly evil I had felt on the *Queen of Madagascar*. I sat there, helpless under his critical gaze, twisting my cap in my hands.

"I...I don't know," I said. "I'm only a seaman, sir. I...well... I felt that it meant trouble for us, somehow ...for England...for the world. Evil, you understand...."

Rohm laughed again, politely. "No, I'm afraid we'll have to have something a bit more concrete than that."

"But can't you check my story?" I pleaded. "Can't you check on the ship and her cargo?"

He thought a minute, and I suppose he finally decided to accept my suggestion, because he was a man who was meticulous about his duty, leaving no alternative open, no matter how impossible.

"All right. I'll ring up Customs."

AFTER a few minutes on the phone, talking in clipped monosyllables, he turned back to me, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it. "Well, Marlow, the cargo from the *Queen of Madagascar* arrived all right, consigned to a perfectly legitimate importer named Nedros in Ryster Lane."

"What was the cargo?" I asked quietly.

"The usual run of Oriental stuff: Carpets, cloth goods, wines, water pipes." He smiled a bit sardonically. "For the curio shops. Items to give your parlor that odd touch, you know." When he laughed this time, it was in appreciation of his own humor.

"I saw that thing in the box!" I insisted.

He shook his head. "No," he said with finality, "the cargo was as stated. That has been verified."

"But I knew the name of the person it was being sent to!" I said. "I was on that ship!"

"Very true. But as for the rest, Mr. Marlow, you are either lying or you are insane. And now, I'm rather busy. If that's all, I'd appreciate your leaving."

"All right," I said, rising. "That's all, I suppose."

I walked out, feeling his eyes in my back, branding me a liar and a madman. The world had gone insane. Somehow, those *things* had left the *Queen of Madagascar* before she reached port. I knew there were many of them. I had looked into that box, and smelled the hold. I knew they threatened danger, vast and terrible danger, but no one cared. I knew they were somewhere in England now, in London, perhaps. And no one would pay any attention....

But I had that note in my pocket! I had come back out of the sea. And even if I had not, no one could have looked into the blank, hellish red eyes of that thing lying there in the iron hold of that storm-lashed ship and not known that here was greater evil than

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mankind had seen for centuries.

I went to a pub and tried to drink. Amid the laughter and the clink of mugs, I tried to sop up those nightmare thoughts in alcohol. But it didn't work. I would drink for a bit, concentrating on the warm, light-headed feeling it produced. And then I'd think of the shape in the box, and I would be sober again, as if I had not touched a single drop.

I went back to *Bane's Rest* in the East End that night. I had no place else to go. The room was dark and chill, and I stared at the ceiling all night. I could not sleep.

CHAPTER III

HORROR IN HARLEY SQUARE

NEXT MORNING my head was filled with a buzzing born of weariness, and my arms and legs felt as though they were filled with lead. A little after seven I put on my cap and jacket and left the Rest to get some breakfast. An ample supply of pound notes had been left in the pocket of my coat by the writers of the note, it seemed.

As I walked along I couldn't help noticing the early-morning mist and the rooftops against the sky beyond. Gray—all gray—suggestive of a hideous dead quality, as if a malignant living mold shrouded London. I bought several newspapers and proceeded to find an inexpensive restaurant. Traffic moved briskly on streets, and well-dressed men in bowlers, carrying umbrellas, moved on the walks, looking very content and peaceful and complacent. I envied them in their security.

Over an egg and tea in the dimly lit white tile interior of the restaurant, I examined the newspapers. The screaming headline of the first paper jerked my attention away from my food and filled me with fresh dread.

Lord Wolters Slain, the words shouted. *Harley Square Home Devastated. Mysterious Killers Still at Large.*

Lord Wolters. I knew the name, of course. Everyone did. In the Cabinet he was perhaps the most important man, particularly valuable to England in these times of stress because of his military experience. Defense needed an able guiding hand, and Lord Wolters provided it. Or he had. Now he was dead. And somehow it formed a link in my mind with the horror on the *Queen of Madagascar.*

I read the other accounts. They said much the same thing. But the third paper gave a bit of news that made my stomach grow cold again. An unofficial report, it said, from servants of Lord Wolters, hinted that the corpse was mangled and dismembered, and that whole sections of the house were demolished, including several walls.

There must be a connection. There *had* to be! Madness was slowly breaking loose in the streets of London. In such a time of world crisis, the death of Lord Wolters and the strange cargo out of the East united to form —what? I could not say, exactly. But, somehow, a meaning lurked there. A dreadful meaning.

Another item on a back page confirmed my suspicions. A fisherman had been killed in a little village on the coast. Before he died, he babbled insanely of monstrous, gigantic shapes coming out of the water, rising from the sea at night, and overwhelming him. A back page! No one would notice it.

THIS WAS two nights ago; the same night I was dropped over the side of the *Queen.* Those...

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things...came ashore and Captain Bezahrov loaded the long boxes with the cargo Inspector Rohm had named as checked by Customs. The things made their way to London, and Lord Wolters died. I had to see Harley Square! Every moment drew me deeper into the horrible pattern, all the more frightening because I knew only vaguely what it was, and not why, or from where.

I left the papers on the table and hurried from the restaurant. A few minutes after eight o'clock I stood in the center of a crowd of curious onlookers outside of the iron fence before the home of Lord Wolters. Scotland Yard was already on duty, guarding the doors. I could see nothing of the ruined interior of the house.

"Have they taken him away?" I asked a man next to me.

"Yes, a few minutes ago." The man laughed, harshly and sucked on his pipe. "Only he wasn't on a stretcher. The hospital men brought out a big canvas sack. I hear he was in small pieces, all torn up. Devil's work, it sounds like." And he laughed again.

I turned away, feeling the chill of the morning fog on me. *Devil's work.* Yes, living devils. My nose twitched, and I finally took conscious thought of the odor hanging over the whole dismal square. Decay and festering rot. The smell in the ship's hold. The smell of the things. They *had* been here!

I listened for a bit and heard people talking about the odor. It puzzled them, but one ventured a guess as to what it was. I wanted to seize them, one by one, and scream at them that I knew. But they never would have believed me, and the police would probably have run me off, less politely than Inspector Rohm had done.

Someone tugged at my sleeve. I turned, half-expecting to see the man with the pipe I had spoken to only a moment before. But another man stood there, a wizened, rat-like little man in incredibly filthy clothes and a checked cap. One milky blue eye peered at me from a stubbled triangular face. The other was covered by a dirty black patch. The man leaned close to me.

"Mr. Marlow," he said in a wheezing voice. His breath reeked of alcohol.

"Yes, my name's Marlow."

"I got a message for you."

A message! Perhaps they were contacting me at last. "Who's it from?" I asked quickly.

The man with the patch cackled softly. "Him Who Doesn't Walk."

"Him—" The words stuck in my mouth. "Look here," I said angrily, "who are you and who's this man you're talking about?"

"Him Who Doesn't Walk," the fellow repeated in his shrill whisper. "He says to tell you he knows you're alive when you're not supposed to be. He says it won't be long, though. He says you haven't got much more time."

"Time? Time for what?"

The blue eye winked at me. "Time to live, Mr. Marlow. Time to live."

ANGRILY I reached out for him, intending to grab him and haul him off to some alley and beat the truth out of him about this incoherent babble of someone called Him Who Doesn't Walk. But as if it were a perfectly timed signal, the man turned away and someone to the rear of the crowd shoved abruptly.

I stumbled forward, bumping against two ladies who were in turn pushed against the iron fence. I fought to get my balance, and finally pulled myself erect. One of the women was adjusting her hat and glaring

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at me as she pinned it in place.

"Look here, sonny—" she exclaimed loudly.

"I'm sorry, madam," I blurted back, and turned again to where I had been standing. I searched the crowd, but I didn't see the man. I pushed my way out and stood finally in the middle of the square, surrounded by the gloomy gray fronts of the old houses. The man with the patch was nowhere in sight.

I started walking. One more incident, one more name on the role of horror and impossibility. Him Who Doesn't Walk. And not much time for me to live! Evidently these men weren't connected with my rescuers. Evidently they did not want me to remain alive because I knew of the cargo of the ship, and linked it with the slaying of Lord Wolters. And some way they could watch my every move, as my rescuers could evidently also do. I walked on, smoking a cigarette thoughtfully.

What could I do? Where could I run? I had so little information, and yet it was enough to warrant my dying. And how soon would the attack come? And from where?

I stopped at an intersection to light another cigarette. A man approached me, this time well-dressed, in a gray overcoat and bowler. He had a slender, scholarly face with intensely black eyes, a straight nose, thin lips and a deeply bronzed complexion. He could have been any age from twenty to seventy. His face was strange, decidedly not English.

"Excuse me," he said. "Do you have a light?" I nodded, holding the match to his cigarette. I had a wild desire to run. He might be the very killer with orders to put a knife in my back.

"Let's walk a bit," he said softly. His voice was accented with strange, resonant tones, as if an Oriental were trying to speak perfect English. He put his hand on my elbow and piloted me down a side street. Then he relaxed his grip and puffed on his cigarette. I waited, ready to turn on him at the first sign of danger.

"I sent you that note, Marlow," he said quietly, staring straight ahead. "I dragged you out of the sea and put you up at *Bane's Rest*. My name is Gerasmin."

THE NAME penetrated dully through my shock. It meant nothing to me. "Can...can you explain anything about what's going on?" I stammered. "You said in the note you...you were my friends. Where are the others?"

"There is only one other," Gerasmin said, with a hint of sadness in his voice. "Her name is Angela. If you will come to my rooms, we will explain a few things to you."

"How do I know you don't want to kill me once you get me there?"

"You don't," he replied. "You must take that chance. But I can only say we trusted you and kept you from dying. You could do the same for us."

"All right," I said. "To your rooms." I wanted, more than anything, to get at the roots of the situation, and I determined to keep alert for trouble while I learned as much as possible.

Gerasmin had rooms in one of the better hotels. I felt out of place in my sailor's jacket and cap as we rode up to the fifth floor. He led me down a dim, thickly-carpeted hallway and into a large well-furnished suite. Large glass windows, stretching from ceiling to floor, looked out upon the street.

The girl he had called Angela stood by the window, smoking and looking out at the gray sky. She was slender

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and well built, with dark hair drawn tightly back over her head. A very lovely young woman as she turned and looked at me with frank brown eyes.

"This must be Mr. Marlow," she said warmly. Her smile was weary, though, as if from strain and worry. "How are you?" I heard the click as the door was locked behind me.

"Fine, thanks," I said awkwardly. Gerasmin threw his hat and topcoat onto a chair and moved to the liquor cabinet. "Sit down, Marlow. I'll fix us drinks. Scotch do for you?"

"Yes, that'll be fine." I twisted my cap in my hands. I wanted the answers! The curiosity was pulsing through me again, almost eclipsing the mad terrors of the last thirty-six hours.

We said nothing until Gerasmin handed out the drinks. Then he lit another cigarette with a steady hand and said, "Marlow, we pulled you out of the sea two nights ago."

"How?" I asked.

"Perhaps I can explain by telling you a little about Angela and me. I am an Indian by birth, and I spent much time in Tibet. Consequently, I have studied realms of knowledge that would not be recognized as valid at Oxford." He tapped his skull, smiling thinly. "Spirit matters, Marlow. Movement of matter by thought. It can be done. And second sight, if you want to call it that. I can see anywhere, at any time."

His words were calm and quiet, and yet the meaning struck home with the force of heavy blows. Here he was, this dark-skinned man with the ageless face, in a hotel room in London, telling me in clipped British accents that he had powers that I never knew existed, powers hinted at only mystically in ancient legends.

"I'm afraid I can't believe you," I said weakly, like a man in shock.

He smiled. "No, I imagine not. You see that?" He was pointing to a small blue vase standing on top of a radio-phonograph console. "Watch it, Marlow. Watch it carefully." He closed his eyes and drew his lips together tightly. His ageless face assumed a rigid quality. I turned my eyes to the vase.

And suddenly—*it vanished!*

Amazed, I turned back to Gerasmin. His eyes were open again and a lazy smile lay on his lips. He weighed an object in his left hand. The blue vase.

"That," he said, "was relatively easy. I saw you on the *Queen of Madagascar*, saw you dropped over the rail. I brought you out of the sea, to this room, and took you by cab to the Rest."

WHAT WAS the man saying? A sorcerer. . . he must be that, an ancient sorcerer reborn. This was not the modern world of London. And yet it was, with a new and frightening dimension added, a dimension of magic and witchcraft, the supernatural.

"Why did you rescue me then?" I stammered. "And how did you know about me in the first place?"

"We, or rather Gerasmin here, had been watching the *Queen*," Angela explained, "ever since she set out from India with her cargo of demons. That's what they are, Marlow. Creations of sorcery."

"And I just happened to be on board. Is that it?"

"Yes." She nodded. "The *Queen* needed one more crewman. They were undermanned as it was, since all of them but you were hirelings in the scheme. Only Captain Bezahrov and his mates, though, knew what the cargo was. And when Gerasmin saw

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you about to die, he decided to save you, in the hope that you would join us."

The questions were coming faster than I could ask them. "Where... where did those things come from?"

"The monsters?" Gerasmin said quietly. "From India; Tibet, Russia—all the dark corners of the East. They have been in the process of creation for ten years or so, by men who still practice the black arts. In a hundred shops in a hundred cities, men worked to create them. They are actual demons, Mr. Marlow, children of what you call Hell. They were common in ancient times. The men who created them did not know their purpose in the Plan. They were paid, and they did their evil work."

"But what for?" I said. "I still don't see that."

"It's a scheme that's been under way for years," Angela said, almost in a whisper. The smoke from her cigarette made a filmy halo around her head. "A scheme to overtake the western world. My father and Gerasmin unearthed it in India twelve years ago. My father was Colonel Saunders."

I nodded. The name was famous in the Indian Colonial Regiments.

Her face grew strained and harsh. "The leader of the organization discovered my father and Gerasmin. Father was killed in Bombay. Gerasmin escaped and we are the only two people who now have full knowledge of the organization."

"To take over the Western world?" I choked. "That seems impossible."

"It's possible," Gerasmin breathed. "It's too possible, with their power. Why, Marlow, the secrets of the East are undreamed of. Those things have monstrous strength. They cannot be killed easily. We have been alone, Angela and I. Now, if you'll join us, there'll be three. There's not a great deal we can do, but we can at least try. We must try! Angela and I have been waiting for years for the scheme to come off. And now it's under way, and London's the starting point."

"From the East," I murmured. "Russia?"

Gerasmin smiled. "Yes, partly. They're even blatant about the fact. It's been written in their books for years. Captain Bezahrov is perhaps the second most important man in the organization. He is pure Russian. The real leader is a mixture of the worst elements in all the Eastern races."

"Would that have anything to do with Him Who Doesn't Walk?" I said.

Angela started. "How did you know that name?"

I explained about the incident in Harley Square, and the man with the patch over his eye.

GERASMIN snapped his fingers and got to his feet. "Then they're on to you. It was only a matter of time, since they can see anywhere just as easily as I can. Yes, Him Who Doesn't Walk is the leader. I've never seen him, but I know he is a cripple and can't use his legs, if he has any legs at all."

"Where is he?" I said. The thing was beginning to fall together, damnably, horribly, and I realized that I was now cut off, alone, and almost forced into alliance with these two. I had little choice, even though they seemed hopelessly pitiful in their efforts, just the two of them.

"He's somewhere under London," Angela said, gesturing. "In sewers, deep under ground, in hidden rooms, everywhere. We've picked up bits of information here and there, and evidently London is honeycombed with tunnels and rooms he and his followers have made over the years."

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"Can't you get Scotland Yard to work?" I said, forgetting for a moment my own experience.

Gerasmin smiled grimly. "You tried it, Marlow. We saw you try it, and we let you go ahead because we knew what would happen. They called you insane. Mad. We face the same problem. And now that Him Who Doesn't Walk is on to you, we may not have much more time to work."

He said it calmly, impassively. And I realized that they were bound to me now, instead of the other way around. They had taken me in on a chance of my joining them, and had thereby exposed themselves to more sudden death. I felt instinctively closer to them, and I couldn't help watching Angela. She was a very beautiful woman to find in such a lunatic's game.

"Look, Marlow," Gerasmin said, "we don't have much chance, I admit. Lord Wolters is already out of the way. God knows who is next. That item about the dead fisherman went unnoticed. Nobody will listen to us, and we're entirely alone. But we'd like to have you in."

I GAZED at him closely, at those ageless black eyes and the fine dark hair resting sleekly on his head. A gentleman of this and other worlds, fighting against an army of hellish creatures born of magic. Then I looked at Angela.

"I'm in, if you want me," I said.

I walked to the liquor cabinet to refill my drink, gesturing as I moved. "And you don't look so bad from here. You seem to take care of everything. I suppose you even had Mr. Sudbury move on, as a precaution."

Angela laughed softly again and moved to the window. "He's a very intelligent fellow, Gerasmin, this Mr. Marlow," she said.

"Where can we start?" I asked. "Or can we start—do anything at all?"

"Now that you are with us," Gerasmin said briskly, "there will be two of us for the actual work. I never wanted to operate alone, and I did not want to expose Angela to danger. She's too important, too valuable."

"I'm afraid I won't be much help," I told them. "I don't have any power—"

"We won't worry about that. I think the first thing is to find out how we get into the underground and see if we can scout some of the rooms belonging to Him Who Doesn't Walk. We'll ask around in the pubs. I have a few friends, although I have a strong hunch the entrance to the underground is through the shop of T. Nedros in Ryster Lane. He—"

"Gerasmin!" Angela spoke sharply at the window. We hurried over and looked down. Two cabs had pulled up before the hotel, and half a dozen men were getting out. Their heads were covered and we could not see their faces. I felt sweat run down my armpits, and for some reason I remembered the words of the man with the patch.

"Can you go into their minds?" Angela asked tensely.

Gerasmin nodded, closing his eyes. A moment later he opened them. "They're from the organization all right. Him Who Doesn't Walk has seen us together and has decided to finish us all at one time. Come on!"

He ran to the closet, pulled it open, and took two large pistols from the top shelf. He gave one to Angela and one to me. Unbottoning his suit coat, he loosened the brass hilts of the two knives in his waistband. Then, after a minute's thought, he took the pistol from Angela and dropped it into his own pocket.

"They're coming fast," he said. "We'll try the regular way out." He headed for the hall, jerked the door

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open and started down toward the fire escape. I ran ahead and pulled the door open, but I stopped short, seeing the figure in the coat and bowler two flights below.

"One's coming up here." I looked out again and caught a glimpse of a dark, upraised face glaring at me as the man climbed. "They look human, but there's another one down in the alley."

Gerasmin started back toward the rooms, with Angela and me close behind. Gerasmin indicated the open door from which we had just come. "In here. We'll try—"

There was a thunderous explosion, and a shot tore past my ear. Angela screamed softly and I whirled, pistol in hand. The quartet of killers had come around the bend of the hall and was closing in.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROAD TO THE UNDERGROUND

I DROPPED to one knee, sighted and fired. One of the men fell and the other three came on, coats thrown open and hands bringing out knives. They were men with dark, alien features, like the crew on the *Queen of Madagascar*. They were perhaps fifty yards down the hall, which was already filled with ropes of acrid smoke and the echoes of shots. A woman screamed thinly in the distance. I remember a couple of heads popping out of doors and drawing back hastily.

Gerasmin fired over my shoulder, carefully and steadily. The second of the killers fell. Almost immediately I fired again, and the third staggered and bumped against the wall, screeching in an unholy language, clutching his arm where a dark, ugly stain began to grow. Abruptly, Angela cried out and we whirled in time to see the fire escape door come open. The first of the men from the alley flung his knife at us, his mouth twisted into a thick-lipped snarl.

I shoved Gerasmin roughly and he tumbled into the open door of the suite. I flattened myself out, feeling the rough furry carpet slam into my face as the knife whispered by overhead. From the corner of my eye, I saw it bury itself in the woodwork a dozen inches above my head, whirring faintly.

We were doing pretty well, but then they hadn't been expecting us to be prepared, I suppose. This had evidently been the first move to eliminate Gerasmin, as well as me. The man of India leaned around the doorframe and triggered another shot. The knife-thrower was blown backwards through the fire escape door. He slammed into the railing, was thrown off balance, and went tumbling over the guard rail. His shriek dwindled as he fell toward the stones of the alley.

An alarm bell jangled wildly down the corridor. I started to get to my feet, and just as I did Angela jerked the knife from the wall, her eyes wide with fright and horror. She lashed out over my head. I ducked instinctively and heard a savage groan. When I turned again, I saw the fourth man of the quartet staggering back, an expression of childish bewilderment on his dark, primitive face. His head tilted back and the bowler fell off. He turned around, took a few steps, fell incongruously like a graceful ballet dancer, and lay still.

Angela's shoulders were shaking. She stared down at the knife with its blade stained a bright liquid red. Her left hand was pressed to her cheek, white-knuckled. "I had to," she breathed, not to us but to some great invisible jury of righteous men. "I

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had to kill him. He was almost on you. . . ." She managed to glance at me, and then she began to sob quietly, her shoulders slumping. "I've never killed anyone before. I've never. . . ." Her words were obliterated by the sobs.

Gerasmin put his arm around her and led her back into the apartment. I followed, the smoking gun hanging in my hand. I was beginning to relax, feeling the strain seep out of my keyed-up muscles. The three of us were in the vestibule, Gerasmin in the lead, when he stepped back suddenly and faced us. His dark eyes were those of a man who had looked into the pit. I caught that hideous odor again. Death. . . Decay. . .

"Him Who Doesn't Walk has been watching his agents die," Gerasmin breathed with harsh, quick intensity. "Now he's sent—"

"What's wrong?" I snapped.

"Don't waste words. Stand close to me. We'll have to leave here. The thing's been transported right into the sitting room." He drew the sobbing girl closer and I moved in toward them. Thank God she was too upset to realize fully what was going on.

SOMETHING tore the vestibule curtains aside and I saw it, towering there, its red smoky eyes glaring with dull fires of infinite evil, its body a thing of shadow, misshapen and lecherous in form, its great furred hands reaching out for us, its mouth emitting snuffling sounds. Again the power of Him Who Doesn't Walk struck home as I realized that this thing had been literally transported by thought to this very room, to destroy us.

It took one step forward. Its hands stretched toward us. I looked frantically to Gerasmin, but his eyes were closed, his lips clamped together tightly, and that vacant mindless expression lay on his face. Tiny globs of sweat glistened on his dark forehead. Angela sobbed wordlessly. *Hurry up,* my mind screamed, *for God's sake, hurry up!*

My flesh crawled. The thing took another step. Gerasmin groaned audibly. The furry hands reached for us and the stench grew overpowering. My mind swam, blank and incoherent, and I wanted to fall forward in weak helplessness. I wanted to stop the terrible effort and let myself be drawn into that thing of ancient evil. Dimly, I heard Gerasmin's whispered words and I held on for a moment longer.

"We're going. . . ."

And then my mind whirled all the more. The room tilted crazily. Gerasmin and Angela fell away, and I swam over and over in a swirling gray vacuum where a furious wind shrieked around me. I waved my arms wildly, trying to catch hold of something. My stomach pushed against my throat and the wind tearing at my skin brought actual pain.

Gradually, a kind of sea-sick rocking sensation filled me, and the grayness broke apart and portions of a scene sifted through. The gray vanished, bit by bit, and I stared at the brick wall across the tiny alleyway, watching it heave from side to sid and gradually come to rest.

Gerasmin was looking around, examining the alleyway. A hundred yards to our right lay a street. "We are five or six blocks from the hotel," he mused, staring at the crowds passing on the street. "That ought to do. We'll get a cab."

Angela gazed at me, quiet now, only her eyes showing the agony she had been through. They were reddish and raw-looking. Gerasmin seized my hand. "Put your gun away, Marlow. You too, Angela. We must get out of here."

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Angela dropped the knife, still clutched in her hand, into her purse. I nodded clumsily and slipped my pistol into the pocket of my pea jacket. Without a word we started toward the alley mouth. "That wasn't easy," Gerasmin said as we walked. "Three humans a distance of six blocks...." He shook his head and closed his eyes tightly. "I get a terrible pain in my head...."

I WONDERED about the tortuous effort it must have been to lift me from the Channel, miles away, and bring me all the way back to London. Evidently he had thought me valuable to do such a thing, and it drew me closer to them.

We stepped out onto the street and began walking toward the corner. The crowd eddied around us, unaware and oblivious of the things we had seen and been through. It made me laugh inwardly, a bit crazily. If they knew, what would any one of them do? It was hard to say, but I wondered how long they would remain sane.

"What was in the room?" Angela asked wearily.

"One of *them*," Gerasmin replied.

"From the ship?"

Gerasmin nodded, and I saw her shudder involuntarily.

"Look," I said, pointing. "There's a cab. Shall we get it?"

They indicated that we should, and minutes later we were cruising through London streets, relatively safe from attack. Only the watching mind of Him Who Doesn't Walk could be on us now. We still had to be careful.

"Now," Gerasmin said, adjusting his necktie, "we'll start getting information about the entrance to the underground."

"It seems pretty risky going in there," I countered. "We'd be in even greater danger of being killed."

"He's right," Angela said softly.

"They will keep trying to kill us," Gerasmin said, staring at the panel closing the driver off from us, "no matter what we do or where we are. We can at least make some effort to find out a bit more about their plans. Perhaps we might run across something. You see, Marlow," he stared at me with those incredibly ancient eyes, "we don't have much chance to live anyway. We might as well make it count."

I thought about it a minute. He was right, of course. I tried to smile. "All right. We'll see for how much it'll count then."

"Good. The pubs. We'll start there, so..."

I didn't need the end of the sentence. I leaned forward, slid the panel back and spoke to the driver. "We want to go somewhere near Ryster Lane."

"Whereabouts, guvnor?" he said, not turning his head. "What number in the Lane?"

"Not *in* the Lane," I corrected. "A few blocks from it."

"All right, guvnor. Where?"

"Any place. You pick the spot."

He turned around and stared at me in a peculiar manner. "Suit yourself, guvnor," he said, shaking his head. They all thought we were insane. We, Gerasmin, Angela Saunders and I. Mad, and removed from society. Yet we saw horrible realities where supposedly saner men could not.

I slid the panel shut and slid back, lighting a cigarette. The smoke felt good in my lungs. Gerasmin had closed his eyes and was resting his head in his hands. He'd been at it a long time, and I suppose every effort of his mind put on the strain a bit more.

Angela sat between us. Her head

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was nodding in exhaustion, dropping slowly toward my shoulder. Once she awoke with a start and smiled hazily, questioningly. I said, "Go ahead. Rest." Her expression was one of grateful weariness as she dropped off, her hair fanning out on the cloth of my jacket.

I leaned back deeper into the seat and shut my eyes. A little rest, even in the joggling cab, would do me good.

CHAPTER V

MEET T. NEDROS

TWENTY minutes later the cabby let us out in a narrow street six blocks from Ryster Lane. Gerasmin paid him. I glanced at my watch. A few minutes past noon. We looked around. The houses were old, falling into ruin. Here and there newer facades intruded themselves among these ancient moldering wrecks. A greengrocer in one place, a phonograph shop in another. Somewhere in the distance a whistle hooted on the Thames. Not too far away, I decided.

"Down there." I pointed to the left, to a pub in the next block. We started walking, our heels clicking along on the stone sidewalks. A strange trio we were as we went into that smoky, beer-smelling place. The bartender glanced at us sleepily, moved away from the two seedy-looking customers, men of middle age in the garb of workmen, and came to wait on us.

We each ordered a beer, Angela with obvious distaste. Gerasmin called the barkeep by name, and they exchanged a few words of greeting until the barkeep moved away to fetch the beer. I leaned closer to Gerasmin, fidgeting, wanting to get some concrete action.

"Why can't you send your mind up to Nedros'," I asked, "and take a look around? It would save a lot of time, and we're short of that."

"And Him Who Doesn't Walk would know somebody was spying. He can feel other minds watching him," Gerasmin replied in a whisper.

"Well, it looks to me like he can probably see us right here, too, and find out what we're doing."

"No." The dark head shook back and forth. "There's been a mental shield around us, the three of us, ever since we came out in that alley. It's hard to keep up, but Him Who Doesn't Walk can't see or hear us. That's one trick we've got over him, I think. As far as he's concerned, Claud has been talking to empty air."

"Careful!" Angela whispered suddenly. Claud, the barkeep, was returning with three mugs of beer. He set them down with great precision, so that none of the fluffy white foam spilled.

"There you are, pal," he said to Gerasmin, rumbling the words loudly. Gerasmin paid him and leaned across the bar in a confidential manner. He crooked his finger and Claud caught on, glancing suspiciously at the two working men and drawing in close.

"I want to ask you a couple of questions, Claud. If you answer the last one right, there's ten pounds in it for you."

Claud laughed under his breath, his thick red face spreading itself into a grin. "Go ahead, pal. Let's have your questions."

"This one is a point of information," Gerasmin said. "How far is Ryster Lane from here?"

Claud jerked a thick thumb. "Four blocks. Towards the river."

"Good," Gerasmin replied. He took a sip of the beer and I followed suit. Angela left hers untouched, watching the barkeep Claud intently. "Here's the next," Gerasmin said. "Have you ever heard of a man called Him Who Doesn't Walk?"

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CLAUD BLANCHED. His eyes grew wide and round, his hands clutched the edge of the bar. I had a strange eerie feeling all over me, as if some strange force, or power, or *mind* were trying, straining to peer at us, but could not. As if it were fighting a barrier, smashing wrathfully against it to see what was going on within our little bubble of invisibility.

"Look, pal," Claud breathed in terror, "I don't want no trouble. Why don't you and your friends go someplace else?"

Gerasmin fingered the notes. In my growing impatience, I wanted to reach out and grab the barkeep's throat and shake the truth out of him. But Gerasmin remained cool and careful, displaying the money only a few inches from Claud's florid face.

"Have you heard of it?" Gerasmin repeated.

Claud licked his lips and eyed the notes. "Yes, I heard of it."

"This is the important question," Gerasmin said smoothly. "Answer it and the money's yours."

"Let's hear it first."

"There's an importer in Ryster Lane. His name is Nedros. Is that shop the entrance to..." Gerasmin hesitated. His eyes and voice grew hard. "...*the underground?*"

Claud breathed heavily, not answering. His eyes darted around the room, and I could see him taking in the tawdriness of his pub, thinking of the tawdriness and the struggle in his existence. He looked at the money again.

"I don't—" he began.

"Ten pounds," Gerasmin whispered, "is ten pounds."

"Sure," Claud blurted out suddenly. "Nedros is the entrance to the underground. But I only *heard* that. I don't know for sure. Remember that. I just heard it." He snatched the money away from Gerasmin, his tone growing strident. "You and your friends better leave."

Gerasmin smiled thinly and motioned to Angela and me. We walked out of the pub, leaving Claud staring down at the money in his hand. Poor devil, I thought. He'll be wondering when he's going to get a knife in the back every day for the next year.

Angela glanced at the clouds, darker now. It was only early afternoon, but it might as well have been the deep of night. We stood on the walk, clearing the stuffy smell of the pub from our heads. Angela spoke abruptly.

"Look, you two. Wherever we go from here, I'm coming along."

"Don't be foolish," Gerasmin said quietly.

"No, I'm serious."

"We've seen things no man should," I said to her, "let alone a woman."

"You forget, Mr. Marlow," she replied, her tone hardening, "my father died in India because of what is going on now. I have a right to be part of your work! I've got a score to settle. Woman or not, my father died because of Him Who Doesn't Walk."

"This doesn't seem like a good place to argue about it," I said, glancing back into the pub. The two working men were staring curiously at us.

"You're right," Gerasmin put in. "We'll find a place to stay until after dark. And then we'll try our luck at getting into the shop of Mr. Nedros."

"I'm going with you," Angela said again in a determined manner.

WE DID not reply as we moved off along the walk. The room we rented was in a rooming house two blocks from the pub. We sat in the chill, dismal place all afternoon, playing cards with a pack we had been lucky enough to find in the desk.

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None of us said much. The ominous sky beyond the cheap yellowed curtains at the window threw a pall over our spirits, and now and again we heard the mournful voice of a horn on the river.

About six I went out for some food and the latest papers. I read them hastily on my way back to the rooming house, my throat becoming tight and dry, my stomach growing cold. I raced up the stairs to our room, forgetting about the sacks of food, and threw the papers down in front of Angela and Gerasmin.

"More of it," was all I could say. They glanced at me worriedly and bent over the papers. One lead story covered the killings in the hotel under a headline that began: *Mass Slaying.* But the most terrible piece of news concerned Sir Guy Folversham, Minister of the Exchequer. He had been slain around noon on his country estate. Torn to bits and left dead and mutilated in his garage. A gardener reported having seen something fleeing across the fields that looked like, "*. . . a great gory shadow,*" the story said.

Gerasmin ground out his cigarette with deliberate anger. "Again," he breathed savagely. "They'll have the country wrecked in a week, at this rate. All the leaders being murdered." He slammed his fist into his palm.

"To Nedros," I said. "Let's get started."

He nodded, rising and checking his pistol. Angela brought up the subject of her accompanying us, and Gerasmin argued with her briefly.

"I'm going," she insisted.

"All right," he said irritably, slipping into his topcoat. "We must stop wasting time. We can't afford it any more. Come with us, but if we signal for you to turn back, come back here and don't question us. Is that clear?"

She nodded, silent and stern-faced. We set off through a heavy fog. I felt depressed, overwhelmed by the tremendous odds facing us. Our heels clicked with empty sounds on the cobbles, and the sound of fog horns hooted dismally in our ears. A flickering street lamp illuminated the sign that indicated Ryster Lane and we moved down the crooked little street, examining each of the shadowed doorways.

Finally I tugged at Gerasmin's arm and pointed. "Here." A numeral above the door said *8*. We stepped into the doorway. The shop lay in darkness, its two windows curtained from top to bottom. Heavy gold lettering on the glass proclaimed, *T. Nedros, Importer.*

"Not much of a shop," Angela said quietly.

"Doesn't need to be," I said, "for what's behind it."

Gerasmin tried the door. It was locked, of course. Without a word he closed his eyes, his lips drew tight and his brow wrinkled with effort. Angela seized my arm, staring at the Indian in the shadowed gloom. Gerasmin groaned audibly and we heard a faint click. He sighed and relaxed, his shoulders slumping as he leaned forward to test the door again. It swung open imperceptibly.

"Come on," he said. "The lock's broken."

WE HAD no sooner stepped into the darkened interior, reeking of incense and the smell of musty cloth and wood, than a bare bulb in the ceiling flared on, revealing the angular glare of dust-covered glass cases, empty now of goods. Evidently T. Nedros did no importing at all to speak of. I snatched my gun from my pocket and shoved Angela behind me.

A voice cut through the silence. "Do

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not use the weapons, gentlemen."

We whirled around.

A section of empty wall shelving stood aside, and in the entrance was framed a monstrously gross man in dirty gray trousers and a filthy white shirt. His head was round and laden with fold on pendulous fold of greasy yellowish fat. Small eyes darted nervously at us, and a tiny pink tongue, like a snake's, flicked over his lips. The naked light bulb shone wetly on his black hair, and I caught the sickening odor of lemon cologne. His fat, childish fingers were curled around a heavy .45 caliber automatic.

"I have a small warning system set up," he said tonelessly, "which arouses me when anyone steps through my front door."

"You're Nedros?" I questioned.

"That is correct. But I have not had the pleasure of meeting *you*."

"We'll forego that pleasure," Gerasmin said coldly.

"I will be quick about it," Nedros said, his cheeks quivering faintly. "I do not know you, but I can guess why you are here. No one would come here who did not belong to the organization, unless they were spies. You could not be here on business of a commercial nature, since I do not actually carry on that kind of business." He laughed ponderously for a moment, and then sobered again. "I must, of course, kill you."

My stomach twisted and coiled itself into writhing knots. Suddenly, I felt something cold touch my free hand, which hung at my side. Nedros could not see that hand, and I felt experimentally. A cold, sharp edge. *A knife!* One from the hotel! I wanted to turn and speak to Angela, to burst out my thanks. But instead I slid the knife up my sleeve and waited tensely.

"Let me have your weapons," Nedros ordered sharply. He indicated Gerasmin. "You first!"

Gerasmin took one cat-like step forward and started to bring his pistol up. Nedros reached out, smashing down with the barrel of his weapon and knocking the gun clattering to the floor. His thick lips quivered. "If I were not going to kill you," he breathed viciously, "I would punish you for being so foolish. I would punish you painfully. You!" he snarled in my direction. "Your weapon!"

I BEGAN walking casually forward, feeling the knife pressing against my fingertips, up inside my sleeve. Nedros shifted his gun to his left hand and extended his right to take hold of the pistol. I took more steps, casually, as if I were out for a Sunday walk.

"That's far enough," he said, not knowing whether to expect an attack or not. His one moment of hesitation, thrown off guard by my feigned carelessness, was enough. His trigger finger began to whiten. I whipped up my gun, striking the barrel of his weapon aside. It roared loudly and one of the glass cases tinkled and smashed to bits. By that time I had slipped the knife out, and as quickly as I could I drove it into his heart.

He gasped, his tiny eyes widening. His gun exploded again as his finger jerked spasmodically, but the bullet buried itself harmlessly in the floor. Then he peered curiously down at the ugly red blotch widening on his dirty white shirt front. Abruptly, his eyes closed, as if he had fallen asleep, and his legs collapsed from under him. His whole fleshy body quivered once in obscene ripples, and lay still.

Angela watched with a terrified expression. I pulled her gently forward, and she shielded her eyes as we stepped across the gross corpse of the dead Mr. Nedros and into the room beyond.

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It was a plain room, with only a bed, a table and chairs and a lavatory behind a screen painted with Japanese figures. A green light bulb was set high in one wall. Evidently the alarm. And in the opposite wall was a heavy gray iron door studded with large round rivets.

Gerasmin breathed deeply. "Well, this looks like the entrance. From now on we've got to be more careful than ever." I stepped forward and pulled up the massive handle, and the door swung open noiselessly. Stairs descended, shrouded in darkness, and far, far down in the distance was a vague gleam of light.

I turned to Angela. "Do you feel up to it?"

She nodded. "Of course," she said softly. I could see that her hands were trembling, though. "Go on," she said.

I took the lead, my heart pounding at triphammer speed in my chest as we started down those stairs that led into a pit of darkness and God knows what unnamed horrors.

CHAPTER VI

THE HALLS OF DEATH

THE STEPS were narrow and steep, so that we had to go down them almost sideways. We tried to make as little noise as possible, holding our pistols ready. The gleam of light grew larger, but with terrible slowness. It seemed as though we were going downward for hour after hour. My legs began to get tired. Once, Angela stumbled and almost fell. I turned in time, catching my balance, to keep her from going down and sending me tumbling down with her. She breathed tensely for a moment, clutching my arms, her face near mine, and then she said, "I'm all right. Let's keep going."

We were like three heroes from ancient legend making the traditional descent into hell, except that we were not heroic. We were frightened; even Gerasmin had been nervous and edgy since the encounter with the killers at the hotel. What lay down where the light beckoned, we couldn't tell. One thing was sure, however. We were in the underground. The horrible stench of those *things* filled the air, even as near to the surface as we were.

The light turned out to be a small blue bulb set in the wall at the bottom of the stairs. I turned back to them and whispered, "We're almost at the bottom. A tunnel runs on from here."

"Let's wait a minute and get our breath," Gerasmin replied. I nodded, stepping off the lowest step and helping Angela down. She leaned tiredly against me. We examined the corridor ahead of us, our nostrils filled with that timeless reek of dead life reborn.

The corridor stretched into the distance, lit every hundred yards or so by one of those blue bulbs, shining like vague blurred rows of streetlamps. The corridor evidently had no end. It stretched away and ended abruptly in the shadows. Gerasmin and Angela indicated that they were ready and we started out again. We tramped on down that hall for another endless space of time, with the blue bulbs marching past, one after another.

At last Gerasmin whispered, "Look up ahead, Marlow. The corridor ends!"

PERHAPS we had stumbled into some by-way designed to throw prowlers off the track. But it couldn't be! There had been no cross corridors anywhere along the passage. "No," I replied, "there must be a door." I walked faster, conscious of

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the fact that we were deep underground and above us lay London, where perhaps even now more hideous crimes were taking place. We were in the stronghold of Him Who Doesn't Walk, and even though Gerasmin's mind kept a shield around us, I had the feeling that we were dreadfully close to death.

The corridor did not end with a door. It turned abruptly to the right for a few feet, and to the left again. As I rounded the first turn, I jammed myself back against the wall. Gerasmin and Angela pulled up short. Light spilled down the corridor, evidently from a room a few feet to the left of the next bend. I listened and heard the harsh tones of a voice I recognized.

"All right, old boy," the voice said, *"so you do argue with him, wot does it get you? A berth in the river, is all."* A heavier, deeper voice mumbled something in reply that I could not hear.

"That voice belongs to the man with the patch on his eye," I whispered to the two behind me. "You remember, the one who gave me the message from Him Who Doesn't Walk, in Harley Square."

"Hear anything else?" Gerasmin asked.

"Another voice. This must be a stop on the route to the center of operations."

"We'll have to rush them," Gerasmin whispered.

I nodded. "Angela, you stay here until we finally get them cleaned out." I silenced her with a wave of my hand. "No protests. You ready?"

Gerasmin said that he was. We hesitated only a moment. Here again, beyond the bend of the tunnel, lay possible death. I was becoming numb with the thought of it, and I think I had counted myself a dead man from the very beginning, after waking up in *Banc's Rest*. I brought my pistol up, feeling the sweat on my palms, and started along the corridor at a dead run. Gerasmin pounded behind me.

As we rounded the turn, an alarm bell began to jangle wildly. I cursed myself. Of course they'd have them. And the corridor was thirty feet long! I was halfway down it when the alarm went off. They'd have plenty of time to get ready. I broke into the room and slid out flat on the floor, firing. Two men crouched behind a large table, firing back. One was the man with the patch, who recognized me and cackled with laughter, because he evidently thought we were trapped. The other, a swarthy, thick-set man wearing gold earrings and a thin black mustache, fired at us with one hand. His other, I could see, was frantically pressing an alarm switch on the table.

THE FEW moments that it lasted were filled with noise and smoke. I aimed and shot, and the swarthy man's hand, pressed on the buzzer, disappeared in a welter of blood. He reared up above the table top, and Gerasmin's shot sheared half his head away. The man with the patch screamed thinly and tossed his gun down.

"Don't kill me," he whined, "come on, give a guy a sporting chance." He raised his hands over his head, but I watched his one milk-blue eye rolling wildly. He was listening for someone!

The room contained doorways to half a dozen corridors, branching off into all directions. From down one of them, I knew, would come men to finish us. Gerasmin pressed forward and shoved his gun against the one-eyed man's neck.

"I want you to talk," he whispered

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savagely, "and immediately. The friends you signaled for won't be here in time to save your life."

"I don't know much, Your Honor," the man whined. "Honest to living Jesus, I don't, Your Honor."

Gerasmin jammed the barrel tight against the man's throat. "The next attack. When will it be? The next killing. What will it be?"

The man writhed against the wall. "Honest, Your Honor..." His one eye blinked wildly.

"Tell me!" Gerasmin snarled. I caught a whiff of fetid air from a corridor at the opposite side of the room. Not the smell of the beasts. The river smell. Perhaps that corridor was a way out, leading to the river. I noted it quickly in my mind and turned back to Gerasmin and the one-eyed man who was cringing now, trembling against the wall. In the distance, down another corridor, I heard a sound of footsteps running. Still far away, though.

"I'll kill you before they get here!" Gerasmin raged. "Tell me! The next attack!"

"Tomorrow..." the man wheezed. "Tomorrow, I think that's it, Your Honor."

"You'd better be sure."

"That's it!" the man fairly screamed. "Don't shoot, Your Honor, I'm sure. Captain Bezahrov himself told me, just an hour or so ago."

"What time?"

"Ten o'clock, tomorrow morning."

"Where?"

"Number... Number Ten, Downing Street, Your Honor...."

"Good God!" I exclaimed. *"The Prime Minister!"*

"That's what we wanted to know," Gerasmin said. "You'd better get Angela."

I had completely forgotten about her. I went back into the corridor calling her name softly. And then I stopped. The tunnel was filled with that overpowering stench, and a section of the floor was gone. I knelt down and felt an iron ladder leading down into darkness. The smell rising from the hole made me retch. Angela was gone! Fear raced through me. I started down the ladder, but heard Gerasmin calling me!

"Marlow! They're coming!"

"Angela's gone!" I shouted back. "She's—"

A thunder of shots cut me off. I stood for a moment, my mind raging, torn in two directions. Angela, lovely, frightened Angela was gone into the darkness, gone with the monster taint lingering in the air behind her. Someone watched the corridor, not with his mind but in actuality. Something had risen up out of the dark ground and taken Angela!

Shots were roaring back in the tiny room. I heard Gerasmin's anguished scream. *"Marlow!"* And I raced back. The man with the black patch had fled. Gerasmin was crouched behind the table firing down a corridor. Answering fire filled the room, bullets smacking into the walls.

I RAN ACROSS the room on my knees and dropped down beside him, triggering a couple of shots.

"We've got to get word back about the Prime Minister," he whispered. "We've got to go back now!"

I indicated the corridor directly back of us. "Do you smell the river there, or is it my imagination?"

His teeth were clenched tightly together. "I smell it. We'll have to run for it. I'm— I'm too tired to try with my mind." The corridor from which the shots had come was silent now, but we heard a soft rustling of feet. They were stealing closer...closer... Gerasmin pulled at my sleeve and,

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bent over, we ran toward the corridor. Shots whispered in the air around us, but we got safely into the darkness and we kept running. They came after us, but our shots, thrown back behind us, kept them off. No blue bulbs lit this corridor. Finally we slammed into another iron door. The strong odor of the river filtered through a thick wire grill.

My hands moved over the door and I found a wheel. "Here!" I whispered, and began to turn it. Gradually the door swung open and we stepped out onto the slippery mud shore of the river. I let go of the door and it closed automatically. Breathing harshly, we pulled ourselves up the slope until we were directly above the door, and we lay there with our guns ready, waiting.

The killers did not come out of that door.

Finally I began to breathe more easily. I looked around. The bank stretched away in either direction. Lights lined the opposite shore, and a tug moved past us in the stream, its whistle sounding. My mind relaxed then, too. We were out of that hellish underground, out of the nightmare world of dark corridors and death at every turn. Two thoughts struck me suddenly. The assassination scheduled for tomorrow at ten, and Angela. I turned quickly to Gerasmin.

He lay stretched out on his stomach, as if tired. I spoke to him. He didn't answer. I spoke again, and again silence. My backbone grew chill. I reached out and touched him. I turned him over, and saw with horror the dark ugly red stains on the front of his coat. He stared at me, his eyes wide open.

He was dead.

I heard the tug's whistle cry out mournfully a second time.

CHAPTER VII.

HIM WHO DOESN'T WALK

THE NIGHT and the dark river closed upon me, and I felt death and horror creeping around me. I realized now just how alone I was. Gerasmin lay dead before me, all that strange ancient power gone, cut off. Mighty as he was, his mind had not been quick enough to stop the bullets that tore the life out of him. The shield was down, too. No longer could I move unobserved. Him Who Doesn't Walk could watch me, any hour of the day or night.

And Angela. The frightening thoughts struck me, one after another. She was down there in the underground, perhaps dead already. I had a wild urge to go back in there, and I started scrabbling on the bank to find the entrance. But I couldn't find it anywhere. Perfectly concealed. The wet clay of the slope was everywhere the same.

Marlow alone. Marlow against them, the unseen ones, all the more terrible because they were unseen. I realized dimly that there was only one way for me to keep alive, one way for me to be strong enough and quick enough to elude them for a time. I had to hate them. I had to hate them with every anguished quivering fiber of my soul. Hate would make me move faster, and even though I might move into a rain of bullets or the arms of one of those shadowy things, still, on the other hand, I might spend my time deliberating and die all the sooner.

Slowly, methodically, I began to think about them. I concentrated on Gerasmin's corpse, stared at the blood thickening and darkening on his coat front. I remembered Angela, pictured her writhing under a hundred

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obscene tortures, pictured her starving, pictured her dead, that lovely face racked by fear and unspeakable sights. I felt tension gathering in my body, crystallizing. The thoughts sang loud and clear as I pictured the man with the patch and his sly, lecherous warning in Harley Square, and the news of next morning's proposed slaughter.

My hate bubbled up, seethed and settled to a constant fire of anger within me. It was personal now, very personal. I had forgotten the other men who had died. I wanted to be there, when Bezahrov arrived at 10 Downing Street. I wanted to stand up to Bezahrov and fight with him and kill him if I could, for the beast he was, he and all of them.

But a bit of rationality got through to me, thank God. I went away from the river bank, much as I did not want to. With one last look at Gerasmin's corpse and a promise uttered silently to him, I walked away from the river. I had one person to turn to now, one person, whether he wanted to help me or not. I would force him to help me. I would transfuse my hate into his body and his mind and show him that he had no other choice.

I checked a directory for the address of Inspector Rohm. A cab carried me to his flat. Two flights up dingy red-carpeted stairs, three doors down the hall smelling of tobacco and liquor and sweat, and I knocked on his door. I heard his voice from within saying, "Just a moment." I took out my pistol again.

The pistol greeted him when he opened the door. His sharp blue eyes took it in, and darted to my face. "Do you remember me?" I said harshly. "Marlow, Steven Marlow. The man with the insane story?"

"I remember you, certainly," he replied, his scholarly face a bit pale.

I gestured with the gun. "Let me in." He stepped back and I went into the flat, closing the door behind me. Rohm blinked helplessly and I gestured again. "Get your coat on."

"Where are we going?"

"Number 10, Downing Street," I said quietly.

"Number 10—" he choked. "You're mad!"

"This is part of my story," I said evenly. "A story that is not mad, a story that is not insane or unbelievable. If you do not come with me, the Prime Minister will die at ten tomorrow morning, exactly as Lord Wolters and Sir Guy Folversham died. I'm forcing you to come with me so that others will believe what I say. I'm forcing you because it's the only way you'll see what I say is true."

"What if I don't?" he said quietly.

I smiled thinly. "I'll kill you, Inspector. Do you believe me?"

He stared at me from those probing eyes for a long minute. "Yes," he said finally, "I believe you. I'll get my coat."

WE HAILED another cab. I pushed the pistol toward the driver and told him I was taking over. With Inspector Rohm beside me, we drove to Downing Street and parked the cab. And then I began talking, while the dark hours of night raced across the sky, while the stars lay hidden behind mourning-robes of clouds. I poured out the story, the part he had heard and the part he had not heard. I told it all, every detail, every instant.

And then I said, "Do you believe me?"

"No," he said quietly. "I don't. Are you going to kill me for it? Are you going to kill me for thinking it's too incredible?"

"Damn you!" I shouted at him.

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"It won't stop here. They'll burn Europe and they'll destroy America, systematically, because it will be too incredible that such a thing could ever happen. And then they'll pour out of the East, out of Russia, and the few poor devils left alive won't ever have a chance to live like decent human beings again!"

"I am willing to take one precaution," he said softly. Dawn began to etch itself gray on the eastern sky. A horn honked in the distance. "Lord Wolters and Folversham have died, so we can't really afford to take chances. I'd like to ring up the Yard and get a squad of men."

"Machine guns," I insisted. "Get machine guns."

"And I'll have to ring up my superior to request that the Prime Minister be removed from here for the morning. I'll need a telephone for that, Marlow. I'll believe you that much, do that much for you. You haven't committed any crime *yet*."

"Get to the phone," I commanded, thanking God for his meticulous sense of duty, his determination to leave none of the immediate possibilities unaccounted for. If he couldn't see the greater danger, he could at least provide for the one at hand.

I began to sweat terribly. The morning grew brighter, or as bright as another of those lead-gray days could be. The Prime Minister was no longer at 10 Downing Street when the hour came. I saw him leave myself, quiet, impressive, dignified. We had to keep off those obscene things! Men like this were worth it. Ordinary men, everywhere, were worth it! We *had* to!

Officers were stationed in every room. The officers were armed with machine guns. I stood with Rohm, smoking nervously, wishing that I were somewhere else, wishing I could wake up from this hellish dream. From another room came the full metallic chime of a clock. The hour was ten.

THEY CAME up through the floor, six of them, materializing like foul black shadows of the pit, swirling, tumbling, roiling up. Captain Bezahrov came that way too, into our room, and it was incredibly more mad to see a human coming up from the underground.

The machine guns exploded immediately in a roaring thunder and the things broke apart in an orgy of blood and screams and decaying filth. Bezahrov whirled around once and sprawled on the floor, spilling out the last few moments of life. They had been transported up through the ground, *thought* into this building on their mission of destruction, only to meet quick, furious death.

We bent over Bezahrov, dying, his scarred face twitching convulsively. There were rapid questions and whispered desperate answers. A bomb. Under London. Demolish half the city. Noon. Two days from now. Noon!

"Rohm!" I whispered, "we've got to get into the underground."

He turned to me. His voice suddenly faded away into the distance and I saw his horrible sharp eyes peering into mine. *"Yes, Marlow,"* he whispered, so the others could not hear, *"into the underground."* His voice died suddenly and he stared at me.

I tried to say something. I could not. I could not speak! My throat was tight and thick and I could not utter a word. In sick horror, I heard Rohm dismiss his men, sending them back to Scotland Yard. And then I heard a voice whisper in my brain, "Come, Marlow, into the underground. I want to kill you before I go. You have caused me much trouble. I want to kill you *myself*."

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The voice of Inspector Rohm. The mind of Inspector Rohm taking me over, holding me speechless, immobile. Holding, gripping. The bomb. I wanted to scream. Dimly I saw the officers moving toward the street. Inspector Rohm stared at me. Inspector Rohm.

Him Who Doesn't Walk!

I heard the wild hellish laughter of the man who called himself Inspector Rohm. It echoed a dirge in my brain until I lost consciousness.

THE PATTERN came dreadfully clear before I awoke. Somehow, in a black period of semi-consciousness before I opened my eyes, a mind seemed to be telling me things I wanted to know, telling me in order to torment me before I reached the final end. He had done certain things. Why did I think I had been sent to him especially, out of all others, at Scotland Yard? He had willed it. Then he had sent me away. Then, when I returned again, he had been forced to protect the Prime Minister. *Forced,* because he did not want me to suspect. Did I understand? *A laugh.* He had allowed Bezahrov to die, he had not cancelled the attack even though he knew it would fail, in order to take me. He did his duty as Inspector Rohm and the Prime Minister lived. And Him Who Doesn't Walk dismissed the officers. They had not been close enough to hear Bezahrov's whispered words, you see. Into the underground, to kill me before the bomb went off. All along, he had been watching, been waiting at certain points along the trail. Damnably clever.

The thoughts came faster now, vengefully. Where now? Paris, Berlin, America, anywhere. Step by step. The high ones commanded it. Where were they? I felt my muscles aching as if some monstrous thought-hand held them. The masters were in Russia, in the East. The masters wanted the world. Had not they told us that so many times?

We were alone in the underground and no one would know about the bomb going off in two days. Inspector Rohm could arrange to die as a hero. Strange, eh? But I did not understand him, quite... the Prime Minister allowed to live that I might die... once again I caught a conception of the violent, gigantic force of evil purpose and even more diabolic personal wrath in Him Who Doesn't Walk.

Wake up, Marlow!

I opened my eyes. I was standing in a room similar to the one in which we had fought with the man with the patch. There before me floated the torso of Inspector Rohm, alive, peering at me. But—but—Great God!—*he had no legs!*

From the waist down, nothing but emptiness, invisibility. I saw the trousers, socks, shoes and shorts on the floor. The monstrous vision hung before me, grinning at me: Him Who Doesn't Walk held a pistol.

"Now, Mr. Marlow," he said quietly, "you have thirty seconds before I will shoot you down." His voice was soft. "You're peering so intently at my legs." He laughed at the last word. "Thought, Mr. Marlow. The power of brain. Life where there is no life. Inspector Rohm walked on legs of *mind.*"

Mind....desperately, I sought for the answer. I felt it gnawing at my brain, another voice, trying to get through, trying to break the wall. I felt the weight of the pistol still in my pocket. Him Who Doesn't Walk did not think I could use it. Could I? If the voice... if the voice...

"Thirty seconds, Mr. Marlow."

I felt the sweat standing out on my face. The voice... the voice was com-

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ing closer, rushing with a sound of other ancient voices flying on the wind from lonely temples on vast snow-swept peaks. The spirits of men who had touched holiness, goodness, coming toward me, summoned by that prime voice to add their strength, coming, if only I could let them in. But how? How? Not through me. I was not calling them. Who was?

"Twenty seconds. Prepare yourself, Mr. Marlow. Pray to God who does not exist." He laughed shortly and cocked the pistol. "I am going to enjoy slaying you, Mr. Marlow. You have interfered so much...."

Come! Come! From a thousand ancient lands, someone is calling for strength, strength and a moment of life...straining, fighting...screaming his thoughts in an effort to penetrate....

"Fifteen seconds, Mr. Marlow."

I am coming...I am trying...I am coming...call me by name...I can't, I thought wildly, I don't know of these things. I don't know of powers like this.

"Ten seconds, Mr. Marlow."

You must call me by name. I can't. *Can you hear me?* Yes. *Call me by name. It rests with you. You are afraid.* Yes, I am. *Do not listen to your fear. Think of me...think of me...who am I? I am here for a moment in eternity, waiting, watching. Call me...the spirits of good men have filled me...I am yours...call me,* the agonized voice shrieked in desperation.

"Five seconds. Goodbye, Mr. Marlow." Him Who Doesn't Walk laughed.

His finger whitened upon the trigger.

No...no... I thought...no...no I waited for the bullet, and in that split instant, I pushed down the nauseous fear flooding over me and thought clearly...of course...of course...the one....

"Gerasmin!" I screamed, throwing myself forward.

Him Who Doesn't Walk started and cursed. "You fool! Gerasmin is de—"

BUT HE was not! I had thought his name and summoned him and he stood in the room, pale, shadowy, filmy of body, one hand pointing accusingly at Him Who Doesn't Walk, and the blood still running on his chest. His lips were tight, and his eyes were closed, and that ancient face that was still young seemed to radiate a kind of unearthly light.

Him Who Doesn't Walk turned on the apparition and started firing wildly. It vanished as quickly as it had come, like a magician's puff of smoke. By that time, though, I had my pistol out. I shot with hateful accuracy, aiming at the figure before me, wanting to tear the legless horror to bits. Finally the smoke and the noise diminished and I looked down. I knew I would never see his true face. Inspector Rohm's face had certainly never been his.

And I had blown his head away.

I heard a rushing of wind in my mind, of the spirits, of the entities, going back to their temples against the roof of the world, back to their ancient books of goodness and truth and wisdom and light. Another sound whispered, the voice of Gerasmin returning to the mystic realm of the dead, with a syllable of farewell. It was no word I could utter or write down, yet I understood it. He had given me the strength to call upon him, and a touch of the ancient forgotten power.

I glanced at my watch. Ten-thirty. I began to walk through the underground. At fifteen minutes before eleven, I found the bomb mechanism

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and destroyed it. At eleven-eight, I found Angela locked in a cell off one of the main corridors, sleeping, her hair disheveled, her face thin and pale. Perhaps Him Who Doesn't Walk had forgotten her in his fury to get me. Not stopping to wonder why a great deal, I thanked God she was still alive and carried her out of the underground, up through the shop of T. Nedros into the daylight. Behind me as I walked, I heard countless scurryings. The servants, the lackeys of hell were leaving, returning to their holes, their driving life force gone. The master was dead and I hoped that another would not call them forth for ten thousand years.

They put our story in the newspapers. Not with our names, because I did not want that, and the government supported me. They told how the real Inspector Rohm—his corpse—was found by the landlady in a closet in his flat the afternoon after I destroyed Him Who Doesn't Walk. They burned out the underground with flame throwers, too, destroying the last remnants of the things I first saw that night on the *Queen of Madagascar*.

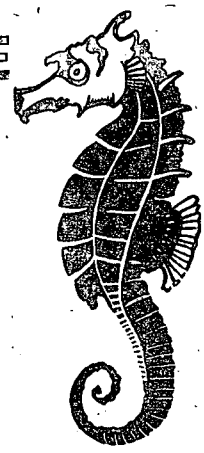
And for us, then, Angela and me, it was over. We were free. I gave up the sea and took up a landsman's trade. We married a year later, and now we have our own home and a small son growing up. Once a year we go down to the cliffs of England and stand looking out at the dark Channel and the dark sky and the darker world beyond. We remember that it came once. We remember that it is written in their books. We stand on the cliffs in the wind once a year and watch the East.

We must not forget.

THE END

A HORSE OF A FISH

By PETER DAKIN



ONE OF the most colorful products of Nature is the Sea Horse, a little water animal which has fascinated man since the beginning of time. Its appearance alone is intriguing: it has the head and neck of a horse, the chest of a pigeon, and a tail like a monkey's. It is encased in a tough, brittle series of plates which hold it erect and force it to swim in an upright position, propelling itself by the fan-like fin on its back. Two transparent fins at each side of its head are in a constant state of motion.

The sea horse is proficient at changing its color to blend with its surroundings, so that the most observant seeker would have difficulty in finding it. Its eyes work independently of each other—one can be watching the surface of the water for an enemy, while the other searches below for food. This seems an enviable way of doing things: think of what man could accomplish with such a setup.

There are over 40 different species of this fish, ranging in length from one inch to one foot. They live in almost every warm sea area in the world.

The buoyancy of the sea horse is stabilized by a bladder. If this should be punctured, and any gas escape, then the fish is indeed in trouble. He sinks to the bottom until he can manufacture enough gas to fill up his tank once again.

The sea horse feeds on infinitesimal animal and plant life, and will eat nothing that is not alive and in an active state.

In an elaborate mating performance, the female creates the eggs, then transfers them to a kangaroo-type pouch with which the male is equipped, where they remain in incubation for 45 days. When born, the tiny young are exact duplicates of the adults, except that their bodies are transparent.

The sea horse is a fish that has always stimulated the imagination, and through the centuries it has been credited with the widest and most impossible range of powers, powers of which many fiction writers have made fascinating copy.

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All young girls are taught that "Mother knows best". But in Diana's case, Mrs. Wray knew far too much . . .

The woman cringed in fear as he ruthlessly pulled off the cover

ONE GUITAR

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SHE DIDN'T look like a zany character. As she leaned back against the piano to sing she looked like a tired, slender, rather serious girl. Under the soft spotlight her skin was milk-white, in pleasant contrast to her dark red hair, which fell softly in a medium-length bob. She wore a two-piece grey wool dress and lavender silk scarf with a casual distinction that failed to conceal the fact that her supple young body bloomed in all the right places.

She sang, with matching casual distinction, in a low, husky, voice. Her phrasing of the simple popular ballad was sure, easy, unique.

By Sam Merwin

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Although he had not before admitted it even to himself, it was her husky charm of voice that had brought Lew and his trio to Midland City and an engagement at the Jack of Hearts. Hearing her, seeing her, he was glad he had badgered his agent into the booking.

When she began her second number, a folk-blues, Lew slipped into his chair on the platform behind her, began to improvise added accompaniment on his guitar. He was a tall shaggy young man whose mastery over his trumpet was absolute. On the first break, when both singer and piano rested, he cut in with a lick he had practiced but had never before played in public. He had been saving it for something special.

Slowly she turned her head and her long-lashed grey eyes locked tightly with his blue ones. There was an appraising quality to the faint lift of her smile, that suggested she was weighing him as well as his music. He felt numbed, all gone inside, as she turned back to finish the chorus. Yet, somehow, his fingers made music, fitting his chords into those struck by the pianist.

When it was over and the spotlight was off, she came back by the stand and looked at him again. She said, "Thanks, Lew Harlow."

Stupidly he said, "Thank you." Then he blurted, "You're Diana Wray. I heard your recording of *Dallas* with Tal back in New York."

She made an odd distrait gesture with her left hand and said, "I'm afraid I didn't get much into it. I was terrified."

He looked at her, his eyes refuting her remark, and, confronted with her obvious lack of confidence, some of his own assurance returned. He said, "Let me buy you a drink. We don't go on again for twenty minutes."

"I'd like a cup of coffee," she said.

So they had coffee together at a small table close to the kitchen doors in the rear of the cabaret. Torrents of sound broke around them as a five-piece Dixieland band blasted out its stuff on the stand. He was marveling at the greyness of her eyes when she said, looking down at her cup, "You're better than Tal. Not better, maybe, but you work better with me."

He said, meaning it, "Why do you stay here in Midland City? Why don't you come on to the Coast with us? I think our music belongs together, too."

AGAIN she made the odd distrait gesture with her left hand, and her lashes shadowed her eyes. She said, "I guess... I mean I took it for granted you knew. I can't leave here. Things...happen. Besides, there's my mother."

"We can arrange something for your mother," he said. He leaned toward her, gripped one of her slender wrists lightly. With the contact they seemed to flow into one another. He said as softly as the music would permit, "Come on—say you will. We need you, *I* need you. I think maybe you need us."

She pulled her wrist free with a sharp movement and now her eyes were wide with fright. She said huskily, "If you know about me, you know I can't."

He exploded. "But that's silly! Nobody's really haunted."

"I am," she said simply, with resignation. "It isn't what happens to me— I never get hurt. It's what happens to people around me. I'm afraid somebody will get killed."

"Poltergeists!" he said with a trace of contempt. "It's mediaeval. I don't believe it."

"I do," she told him. Then, "I wish

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you'd leave me alone. I have to stay here, that's all. Please don't torment me."

"Sorry, Diana," he said contritely. "You must know *why* I want you along."

The ghost of a smile was back. She said, "I know, Lew—and thanks. I wish I could go with you. I like your combination. I'm beginning to think I like you."

Scowling, he rested his elbows on the tablecloth and said, "Haven't you tried to lick it? A psychiatrist—"

"It's no good, Lew," she told him. "I've tried everything. When they're around nothing happens. When they aren't and I try to leave town..." She shrugged. "So I'm stuck here with Mother. Manny Wilson pays me a living wage, the people here like me, it could be a lot worse."

"But why doesn't your...er... whatever-it-is affect you here the way it does everywhere else? It's crazy," he said, running long muscular guitarist's fingers through his brown hair.

Her reply was an enigmatic look that forced him to drop his gaze. Finally he said, still not looking at her, "Are you— I mean, is there somebody? What I really mean is, can I date you while I'm here?"

She said, "There's a man or two—nothing serious. I can't afford to let myself get serious. You may date me if you wish. But I'm afraid you'll regret it."

"Do you believe that?" His eyes were again on hers.

Her smile this time was deeper, softer, more sympathetic. She shook her head slowly, said, "No, not really. Perhaps that's why I'm afraid—this time."

"Have there been a lot of others?" he asked her.

SHE SHRUGGED again. "A few—too many," she said quietly. "Does it matter to you very much?"

"Not to me—not now," he replied and was surprised to discover he wasn't lying. His burgeoning possessiveness toward her dated only from this evening. He wondered a little at that too. Never before had he wanted to own anybody. Never before had he wanted anybody to own him.

A week later Lew and Diana sat side by side on the jump-seats of a long, slick, chauffeur-driven limousine. Behind them, on the rear seat, the members of Lew's trio sang softly in expert rhythm with highly unexpert voices. They rode smoothly along the winding road through the mountains that surrounded Midland City, on their way after hours to play for a party at the mansion of the multi-millionaire in whose limousine they were sitting.

It had been an exasperating and frustrating week for Lew. He had dated Diana every night, but nothing had come of it save emotional misery. He was deeply in love with her and he suspected she was as deeply in love with him. They rehearsed together afternoons, they worked together evenings, they dined, supped and occasionally lunched together. But that was all.

She had permitted him to kiss her but once, the night of their first cup of coffee. Then she had said, "No, Lew, I'm not going to let it go any further. It would make us both too wretched."

He was head over Achilles' tendons in love for the first time in his adult life. Yet every night, when he took her home, he had had to leave her with a mere pressure of hands in the lobby of the apartment house where she lived with her mother.

He had asked about Mrs. Wray, wanted to meet her. But Diana had said, "Mother wouldn't like you. She

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hates men. She's been a cripple ever since I was born. Sometimes I think she hates *me*."

"What about your father?" he had asked.

She had lit up in a quick glow of pleasant memories at the question. "Oh, Dad was swell—but he got killed in the war, at Kasserine Pass." Her momentary happiness had faded at the recollection of her loss as quickly as it had come.

NOW, SITTING beside her in the limousine, he looked at her through the semi-darkness, saw her shiver. Her grey eyes slanted to meet his and her lips were narrow with fright. Her hand crept into his as she said, "I shouldn't have come, Lew. There's going to be trouble. I can feel it."

Lew exploded. "Dammit, Di, we *have* to make the try. Your music and mine belong together. I never want to play without you again."

Her smile was sad. She said, "You'll have to, Lew. Unless you want to stay in Midland City. You know I can't leave."

They were within a couple of miles of their destination when, without warning, a front wheel rolled off the limousine, sending them jolting and careening into the ditch. By the time another car was summoned to convey them the rest of the way, they were already more than half an hour late for the party.

"Accident," said Lew. "It could happen to anybody."

"But it happened to us," Diana said, her voice uneven. Behind them on the temporary platform put up at one end of the millionaire's ballroom, the boys in the trio were muttering amongst themselves. They had, of course, heard rumors of Diana's eerie reputation. Lew uncased his guitar, began to tune up. He frowned when he noticed that the strings were humming softly without being plucked. It was a constant tone, faint but unmistakable.

They were halfway through their second number, *Honeysuckle Rose*, when a heavy pair of damask French window drapes with weighted valance seemed unaccountably to fly free of the wall, to crash onto the table on which an immense cut-glass punch-bowl rested. The bowl was shattered to fragments, and the footman serving behind it severely gashed over one eye by the valance rod. A lady guest was knocked unconscious, and there were numerous lesser injuries.

Diana's face went chalky. To Lew she whispered, "I'd better get out of here. I can wait outside till you're finished. Otherwise . . ."

"Don't be a damned fool," Lew told her. "You're with us. We stay or go together. It's just coincidence."

"You still think so?" She wore her enigmatic half-smile, but fright was heavy in her grey eyes. When order was at last restored she sang a number. Nothing happened but applause.

"See?" said Lew, smiling. "It's all right."

"BUT IT isn't," Diana protested. "They're just resting." And suddenly she screamed softly, pointed out toward a broad archway at the huge wall beyond. A crystal chandelier was swaying in ever-widening arcs without visible cause. Her scream and gesture focussed the attention of the dancers upon it. They pulled back in panic, barely in time. All at once the chandelier exploded in a coruscating shower of prisms. All that remained in place were the severed wires of its skeleton, dangling from the ceiling like the bone-ends of an amputee.

Fortunately, this time, no one was

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hurt, although it broke up the party. Their host paid them in full over Lew's protests, and within minutes they were on their way back to Midland City in another sleek limousine. The boys in the back seat were silent, accusingly silent, though no further mishap deterred them.

Diana turned to Lew as they neared their destination. "You see?" she said simply.

"I saw," he replied, "but I still don't believe it." However, within himself, he had to accept it. It had happened before. After playing the Jack of Hearts a couple of years earlier, Benny Goodman had hired Diana to go with him and his quintet to Las Vegas. They had been driving and the quintet member at the wheel had been skulled by a rock from nowhere, almost causing their car to capsize. There had been other incidents and he had been forced to send her home.

On another occasion Lew had heard of, a major television outfit had signed Diana to do a sustaining program from New York with all sorts of sponsors in prospect. The train on which she traveled had not been able to move more than a few hundred yards from the station, thanks to repeated and unexplained tuggings on the emergency cord. Diana, terrified, had slipped out and walked back, to the station, after which the train had had no further trouble.

Sitting beside her on the jump-seats he said softly as they swung through the dark suburbs of Midland City, "Di, you're coming home with me. We've got to thrash this thing out. Besides, I have a hunch you need me tonight."

Her reply was a whisper. She said, "Darling, you don't know how much!"

ONCE THEY reached his apartment, he made some coffee and they sat on the couch to drink it. She talked to him more openly than she ever had before. She said, turning her head to look at him, "Darling, there's more to it than the poltergeist business. I have dreams."

"Don't we all," he countered, working an arm under her head to encircle her and draw her close against him.

"But not like mine," she told him. "I have these all the time—wild dreams of space and alien planets. Sometimes when I wake up I feel as if I didn't belong here—on Earth. Lately they've been getting stronger."

"Poor Di," he said softly. "We're going to get married right away."

She hugged him, kissed him lingeringly, whispered, "I'm grateful for *this*, darling. Don't ask the impossible."

He sat up at that, hugged his knees. "Why not?" he asked. "Why is it impossible? I want to marry you, you know that. We belong together—our music belongs together."

"But it won't work, darling," Diana said miserably. "You've got a career. You've got to go on."

"Not without you," he said stubbornly. "If you can stick it out in Midland City, so can I."

"You're sweet," she told him, "but it's not for us. I'm not like other people. I'm . . . well, I'm a freak."

"Oh, shut up," he said, not unkindly. "There has to be a way out of this somehow. Dammit, I'm going to marry you anyway. Maybe that will scare your poltergeist away."

"It won't do any good," she told him. "Besides, there's Mother. We'd have more problems than I'd have a right to ask you to bear."

"I'm doing the asking," he said bluntly. "And I want to meet this mother of yours." He took care not to give her a chance to reply.

The next afternoon he went home

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with her. Diana and her mother lived in a large and comfortable apartment, furnished with good replicas of good antiques. Lew noted it was clean and dusted, felt warmth of approval at Diana's competence as a housekeeper. A plump colored woman, a bright green bandanna about her round head, greeted them at the door. To Diana's question she replied, "Missus Wray's jest the same, Miss Di. I'm glad you finally got here. I've got to go out for a while."

MRS. WRAY lay in a large four-poster bed in a room washed with golden afternoon sunlight. Her skin, even whiter than Diana's, seemed almost to match the pillow on which her pale red hair rested. She looked so frail, so thin, so wasted, that she seemed barely alive—save for her eyes. They were actually lighter than her daughter's, except for tiny black dots of pupils that studied Lew with unwavering malignancy.

Yet her voice, when she spoke, was soft. She said, "Diana, you might introduce me to Mr. Harlow."

Lew, feeling nervous under that constant regard, laughed a little, said, "Consider it done, Mrs. Wray. And please call me Lew."

"I've listened to your music," she said, her eyes moving toward a small radio that rested on her bedside table. "You play very well." Then to Diana, without moving her head, "Diana, please bring me my jacket. You'll excuse me, Mr. Harlow." It was a command, not a request. As he retreated into the living room Lew was conscious of two things about the older woman. One, save for her eyes and lips, she had not moved a muscle while he was in the room. Two, she spoke with a faint sibilance, a trace of accent he failed to recognize.

When he returned she was sitting up in bed, bolstered by a small mountain of pillows, wearing a pale lavender bed-jacket that contrasted pleasantly with her light red hair. Looking at her thus Lew realized something else about her. She was, in delicate perfection of feature, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life. But the light of her loveliness was as cold as a firefly's flame.

They chatted briefly, inconsequentially, and all the while he could feel the malignance gnawing at him. And still Mrs. Wray barely moved. Diana brought a scarf and wrapped it about the slender column of her neck, brought her a handkerchief from a box on the dresser across the room, eventually brought her dinner on a tray. There was a little stewed fruit, a small glass of milk, a single triscuit.

"Mother can't eat cooked foods," she said.

"My stomach is not strong," Mrs. Wray explained, finally moving her arms and hands slowly, carefully, daintily, as she ate. She still continued to address him as Mr. Harlow and, when he caught her gaze upon him, it remained bright with hatred.

IT WAS not until just before they had to leave for the Jack of Hearts that he mustered up courage to blurt, "Mrs. Wray, I'm in love with your daughter. I believe Diana loves me. I want to marry her."

"So?" Mrs. Wray spoke after a long pause, during which Diana looked at Lew with frightened, pleading eyes. The older woman turned to regard her daughter, then looked back at Lew and said, "I've been afraid of this."

"Why afraid?" he countered as persuasively as he could. "It's a lot more than physical attraction, though Lord knows there's that, too. We belong together musically as well as person-

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ally. I have a hunch we'll be happy together."

"In spite of Diana's...affliction?" Mrs. Wray asked quietly.

He nodded. "In spite of that," he said. "I'm perfectly willing to spend the rest of my life here if I have to, to be with her."

"That's quite a sacrifice, young man," she told him—and he could sense savage sarcasm beneath the cool softness of her tone. For the first time she laughed, but it was not the laughter of mirth. She added, "I'm afraid I shall be compelled to think it over."

Lew stood up. He said, "Mrs. Wray, both your daughter and I are of age. We can both support ourselves—and you, if need be. We can, you know, marry without your consent—though frankly, for the sake of Di's happiness, I'd prefer to have it."

"If you marry without my consent—and I very much doubt that I shall grant it—you'll both be sorry as long as you live," said Mrs. Wray with icy finality. "Now, please go—both of you. I must have rest and solitude to think this over."

Diana shivered against Lew as they rode down in the self-service elevator. She said, "Lew, you shouldn't have spoken to her like that. Nobody ever has. She'll never give her consent now."

"Then we'll do what I said and get married without it," Lew said, putting an arm around her and holding her close against his side. "Darling, you can't let her wreck both of us."

"I know, dear," Diana said softly. "It's just that—oh, I can't explain."

"But you'll marry me anyway?" he said, pulling her around in front of him, putting both arms around her. Her unsure "Yes" was almost lost in his kiss.

LATER, in the cab en route to the club, he said, "Di, what's wrong with your mother anyway? I thought at first she was paralyzed."

"She isn't," the girl told him. "But it's just as bad—or almost. She hasn't walked by herself in ten years. It's—there's nothing exactly wrong with her, but she's incredibly weak."

"Damnedest thing I ever heard of," he muttered. "I can't understand it."

"Neither can any of the doctors she's let look at her," Diana said, frowning. "She doesn't like doctors, though. She can't stand to have anyone touch her but Tildy and me."

"It's easy to see where you got your looks," he told her.

"Oh, mother's beautiful," said Diana as if stating an accepted fact. "More so than I ever hope to be. She makes me feel—well, sort of coarse beside her."

"Darling, you're anything but," he said softly. "And you have something she's utterly without: warmth."

Diana crept up into his arms and kissed him, then got to work with her handkerchief on a lipstick removal job. While she scrubbed his mouth she whispered, "Lew, I'll do anything you want."

That evening events developed with amazing speed. An important Midland City judge, who had become a Lew Harlow fan during his stay at the Jack of Hearts, came in with a party. There Lew managed to corner him and tell him he and Diana wanted to get married—that night. It was hardly an impulsive move, for he was terrified of Mrs. Wray's ultimate influence on her daughter's decision to marry him.

The judge, who was in a mild alcoholic glow at the moment, agreed to make a special dispensation. A license was procured from somewhere and after the final show Lew and Diana

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were married from the bandstand with the trio and Manny Wilson, the manager, standing by. There was a party afterward and they didn't get back to Lew's hotel suite till dawn.

The weather turned hot the next day. When they went back to Diana's apartment, Mrs. Wray was not wearing her bedjacket. Her malevolence, as she studied the guitarist, seemed even greater than the day before. This time she made no pretense at politeness as they stood in the doorway.

She said, "Mr. Harlow, I want you to stop seeing my daughter. There are factors involved of which you know nothing."

HER VOICE, while not loud, was chillingly clipped. Lew could feel Diana cave in beside him. He put an arm around her to brace her, said evenly, "Mrs. Wray, Diana and I were married early this morning in a perfectly legal ceremony." He went on to state succinctly the circumstances of their wedding. As he spoke Mrs. Wray seemed visibly to shrivel under the impact of his words.

When he had finished she said, "I feel sorry for you, young man. You don't know what you've done—to Diana as well as to yourself. I must ask you both to leave me for a little while."

"Are you sure you're all right, Mother?"

"What could be wrong with me?" her mother countered ironically. "Please go, though I must say, Diana, I'm grateful for your concern toward me."

Outside, Diana wept in his arms. "I feel so awful," she sobbed.

When finally they were summoned back to the bedroom, Mrs. Wray regarded her daughter with the same hatred she had hitherto reserved for Lew. She said, "Diana—after all my warnings, after all my—"

"Just a moment!" Lew interrupted her sharply, staring at her. He turned to his bride, said, "Diana, where does your mother keep her bedjacket?"

"Why—in the closet," said the girl, not understanding.

"You say she hasn't walked in ten years?" he asked and, at Diana's mute nod, "Then how come she's wearing it now? She wasn't when we were in here a few minutes ago."

"Mother—" began Diana, broke off as the full implication of Lew's discovery sank home.

The hatred in Mrs. Wray's pale eyes seemed actually to crackle, but by this time Lew had gone too far to stop. He took two long strides toward the bed, pulled the coverlet all the way back.

THE LEGS that protruded beneath the fine cambric nightgown were like those of a famine victim. Every bone showed clearly through the almost transparent skin. He looked for a long moment, then recovered the older woman. He stepped back, said, "So it's been you all the time."

Her laugh was almost a cackle as she said, "Yes, it's been I. But knowing isn't going to do you any good, Mr. Harlow."

"What does it mean, darling?" Diana asked, bewildered.

"It means your poltergeist is solved," Lew told her. "Your mother is telekinetic. She can move objects at a distance by mental control. And she's been using her talent to hold you in Midland City."

"You—you're sure?" the girl asked him. Then she turned to look at her mother, and what she read in that exquisite parchment face gave her the truth. She cried, "Mother, why?"

"I can only assure you my reasons have not been selfish," said Mrs. Wray

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faintly. "I'm sorry—but there was no other way. And the time is growing so short."

Lew was scowling at her and running his long fingers through his thick brown hair. He said, "There's more to it than that, Di. I haven't quite figured it out—but I took a pre-med course before I quit college to play guitar. Her joints—her knees and ankles—I never saw anything quite like them."

"Yes, there's more to it," Mrs. Wray told them quietly. "My work here is almost ended. And don't think you can check me now, Mr. Harlow."

"I'm damned well going to try—*Mother,*" he told her. "But those tiny bones, your weakness—it's almost as if you weren't intended for this planet, for this gravity."

"You're very clever, young man," the older woman replied acidly. "But it's not going to do you a bit of good. My work here is all but finished."

Lew continued to scowl and rumple his hair. Finally he said, more to himself than to either woman, "This is nineteen fifty-six, late August. You say your work is almost done. Unless my memory's gone haywire, Mars and Earth are coming into parihelion opposition right now. They'll be closer than they've been in about fifteen years. Coupled with your physical structure and your strange gifts— I'm beginning to wonder . . ."

"You *are* clever," said Mrs. Wray with something like admiration. "If it weren't so patently absurd, it might be true."

Lew ignored her, went on with, "What's going to happen, Mrs. Wray? Are they coming to take you home?"

Mrs. Wray laughed her mirthless laugh again. She said, "Not for me, young man. *My* job is done."

Lew reached for Diana and pulled her close to him. "But why, *why*—why does it have to be my Diana?"

THE OLDER woman replied, "You've figured out so much, my dear son-in-law, you should be able to work that out. Consider, Mars is a dying planet—Earth is not. Yet only a few of our strongest can endure your gravity, your atmosphere, for more than brief periods."

Diana lifted her face, a face blank with hopelessness, to Lew's. She said in a husky whisper, "Darling, it means—it means I'm not even entirely a woman. I'm half Martian." She wrenched herself free of him, fled to a chair, covered her face with her hands, said in muffled tone, "If we should have a child—what will it be?"

"Don't worry, my dear," said her mother. "You're all woman. In some remote era our races sprang from a common stock. But we need your strength on Mars—to breed men and women capable of withstanding conditions on Earth."

"It's horrible!" Diana exclaimed, lifting her tear-stained face to stare uncomprehendingly at her mother. "How can you do a thing like this to *me?*"

"Has it occurred to you that I'm asking far less of you, Diana, than I have given myself?" Quietly, with lucid clarity, she told the story of a half-dozen Martian women, carefully selected and sent to Earth in 1933 for the express purpose of cross-breeding the human species of the two planets, of their landing on an isolated mountain plateau near Midland City.

"We selected it because its high altitude made the atmosphere less heavy for us," she concluded. "Our leaders had studied Earth. We were selected for our beauty by your standards, not by ours. Two of us died within weeks. The rest of us managed to mate. But I was the only one able

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to bear a child and live." There was fierce pride in the statement, indomitable purpose that Lew found himself sympathizing with, even while he loathed the entire concept.

He said, "And when you'd achieved your purpose, what then?"

"Migration," she told him. "Naturally, we don't welcome the idea of living in a world where men are dominant. Their aggressive instincts can bring nothing but ruin. There will have to be changes made. But it will take time."

He looked at his stricken bride, then at her mother. "The dreams," he said. "Diana's dreams. You're responsible?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Wray. "It was a sort of indoctrination. Space travel is not easy."

"And your people are coming for Diana soon?" he asked.

"Within a day or two—no more," the older woman replied.

Lew crossed to his bride, pulled her gently from her chair. "Darling," he said, "let's get the hell out of here."

"If you do," Mrs. Wray told him quietly. "You'll die."

"Oh, my God," wept the girl, "and I got you into this!"

"I got myself into it," said Lew. "Come on. Do your damnedest, Mother. Good afternoon."

HE GUIDED Diana from the bedroom, moved toward the front door. She came unresisting. In the foyer he picked up his guitar. They had been given two nights off from the club by way of a wedding vacation. He could hear the strings humming unplucked even through the case. For some reason the sound spelled warning. He recalled the only previous time he had heard the ominous strumming: the night of the private party when Diana's poltergeist had been in full operation.

Had it not been for this cue he might not have trod so warily, might not have noticed the front-door bolt turn silently as he approached it with his bride. As it was, he jumped clear just in time. The door swung inward at him with vicious force. He might easily have had his face smashed in if he hadn't pulled back.

It slammed shut and relocked itself. Lew gave Diana an encouraging squeeze, then led her back to the living room. "It's no use just now," he said. "We'll have to stay for a bit."

"But what are we going to do?" she asked. Then, trying to pull away from him again: "How can you bear to touch me?"

"Honey," Lew told her, "don't you know it's every man's secret desire to find a beautiful girl who is different? Well, I'm the champ— I've found one about as beautiful and different as you can get. And I'm going to hang onto her."

"Thanks, darling," she whispered, seeming at last to gain a measure of reassurance from his words.

From the bedroom Mrs. Wray's thin voice floated. She said, "I know it's not considered good Earth practise for newlyweds to spend their honeymoon with their mothers-in-law, but I'm afraid in your case it's quite necessary. Fortunately, your honeymoon will be brief."

"This phase of it, at any rate," replied Lew.

He sat down on the sofa with Diana beside him, and began to map some sort of campaign. Mrs. Wray, he felt sure, was dying. She was merely hanging on by sheer willpower until her assignment was completed. Part of him could not help but admire her. Yet, he was going to have to fight her every inch of the way.

He couldn't kill her. Outside of an

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instinctive inability to act so ruthlessly, he had an idea her telekinetic gifts would enable her to protect herself against him, now that she knew him to be an enemy. He had been able to pull back the covers, he suspected, only because his move had taken her completely by surprise. Which meant that telepathy or mind-reading was not among her alien talents.

She had, by her achievements, both telekinesis and extrasensory perception. Otherwise she would not have been able to move objects toward a selected target at a distance. He wondered briefly how it was accomplished, then recalled the humming strings of his guitar. It was done, he felt certain, either through sub- or supersonic impulses. And sonics were something that he, as a musician, understood.

He got the instrument out, listened to its unplucked chord. The combination was odd, alien, yet it made sense of a sort. He picked it up, plucked it, seeking to intensify the same faint sound. He began to get the seed of an idea. He looked at his bride, who was regarding him with wonderment. He whispered, "Don't give up the ship, honey. We're going to win out yet."

HE GOT the combination, or as close to it as the limitations of his instrument permitted. Then, slowly, he began to strum it himself, increasing volume and vibratory rate. The alien woman in the next room uttered some odd unintelligible syllables. He increased volume and frequency still further. A picture took off from the wall and flew across the room to crash against the wall. A chair beneath the windows went into a kind of crazy dance. A table lamp rose slowly in the air, turned upside down, and returned to its place, wobbling a long moment before toppling and shattering on the floor. By increasing the sonic key Lew had stimulated his mother-in-law's telekinetic gifts until they were out of control.

"Lew!" exclaimed Diana, her face a mask of terror. "What's happening?"

He shook his head at her, increased his volume until the sofa beneath them began to rock ominously. Then, abruptly, he struck a series of clanging discords, sharp, harsh, shattering both the tonal and vibratory pattern. As the echo faded, a shrill scream sounded from the bedroom, and every inanimate object around them ceased to move.

Still carrying his instrument, Lew rose and walked to the bedroom door. Mrs. Wray lay flat on her back, her arms outstretched, her small mouth open. At his shoulder Diana said, "Lew, you've killed her!"

"I don't know," he said grimly. He went forward, felt for the faint flutter of her heart. It was still pumping faintly. Without turning he said, "Di, get a doctor here, quick." As he spoke he heard the front door open and Tildy's exclamation as she saw the wreckage in the living room. Then he heard Diana's voice following the gentle rasp of her dialing.

TWO DAYS later, after the funeral, Lew and Diana drove high up in mountains in a borrowed roadster. With Mrs. Wray's death the night following their marriage, and the attendant complications, they had had little chance to be alone. The afternoon sun was still high, although it was past four o'clock.

At a level spot he pulled off the road and parked, Diana close within the curve of his arm. Together they looked out at the mountain vista before and below them. They said noth-

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ing in the contentment of perfect understanding, of relaxed fatigue. Finally, when Lew turned to kiss her, he paused, his muscles tensing.

"What is it?" Diana asked.

"Listen," he told her, lifting his head so that his eyes could scan the bowl of the sky

"I don't hear anyth—" she began, broke off as far, far above them a faint whining drone sounded, increased rapidly in volume as if whatever were making it were entering the atmosphere at tremendous speed. It grew louder, louder...

Then they heard the faint throbbing echo of a far-distant explosion and saw a small white cloud blossom from nowhere, far higher than any cloud could rise. Diana's fist flew to her mouth and she buried her face in Lew's jacket.

"It's probably a good thing," he told her gently, "that your mother didn't live to know of this. They must have hit the air envelope at the wrong angle." He paused, pressed toe on the starter, added, "Come on, honey, let's get back to the hotel and get some shut-eye. We're working tonight."

THE END

START THEM THINKING YOUNG

By

JOHN WESTON

"LISTEN, Son, that's no report card for a twelve-year-old boy. Fifty in calculus, forty in vector analysis, only thirty-seven in differential equations! What's the matter with you? Why, when I was your age, I was well into Maxwell's equations. You're not dumb, Son; you can certainly do better than this."

"Gee, Dad, I tried, but it's really tough. I—"

"Nonsense! If the Slater boy can get it, you can too. I'm going to school tomorrow and talk with your calculus teacher. Something's wrong...."

That conversation isn't as weird as it seems on the face of it. According to a general trend circulating among teachers of "deep, abstruse" mathematics, the whole trouble with the situation is that kids today are introduced to the really interesting aspects of the subject much too late and only after they've spent tedious years mastering the memory work of arithmetic. If they have their way—and it's possible they will—such college subjects as calculus, differential equations and vector algebra are going to be introduced early in high school, while ordinary algebra and geometry and trigonometry will have been mastered in the grade school!

This sounds like topsy-turvy thinking but it actually has a good deal of solid foundation to it, and it's certainly a fact that in the future the study of the so-called "more advanced" branches of mathematics are going to be taught a lot earlier than they are now. None of the ideas behind them are really difficult. This is a fiction fostered by years of saddened teaching of the drill work of arithmetic, an unpleasant chore to anyone, even a budding Einstein. It is curious to note, by the way, that Einstein had lots of trouble with elementary mathematics even though he took to the more abstruse phases as a duck takes to water

Except for engineering students, budding scientists and a few other college groups, most people never come into contact, to grips, with calculus, and these other subjects. The result is that they have acquired a mysterious aura of toughness; actually they are made up of simple, beautiful ideas. The basic ideas of calculus for example, can easily be grasped in an afternoon by any high-school freshman.

After all, mathematics is merely another way of talking, in curt crisp, short-hand syllables, odd to the uninitiated but idiotically simple to one with a dash of the know-how. Teachers are beginning to recognize this capacity of students of average ability to grasp these simple ideas and are stumping for their early introduction. "Give 'em algebra in grade school," they clamor, "and the kids will love it!" So if your children or your children's children come home asking you to do their differential calculus, don't curl up behind that copy of *Amazing*—get up and do the work!

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MAKE-BELIEVE BABY

By JON BARRY

DESPITE all the wonderful miracles of modern medicine, operation upon the various vital glands affecting the body has always been an almost certain invitation to failure and death. Some minor successes have been scored with thyroid-gland operations and similar non-vital glandular cuttings, but the one gland scientists have shied away from is the pituitary. Buried deep in the body structure, the pituitary gland has always been considered inviolable, subject to no surgeon's technique.

A recent experiment, done with the patient's realization that failure was almost certain, showed that modern medicine doesn't appreciate its own strength. Suffering from a severe form of cancer, the patient stood a good chance of living with the successful removal of the pituitary gland. That, of course, was the catch. Ordinarily you don't remove that minute gland—and live. Nevertheless, surgeons took a chance, cut away the glandular tissue—and sustained the patient with cortisone! There is the clue. Cortisone is essentially a hormone, the key to the pituitary.

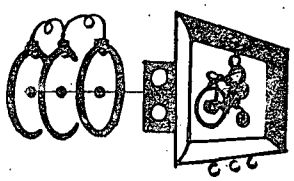
At present the patient is in perfect health, the cancerous matter destroyed, and he is living without a pituitary gland. Still, he must receive his periodic injections of cortisone. One miss—and...

The success of this particular substitution of a chemical for a chemical-creating gland is most promising, and medical techniques will undoubtedly be modified to allow for this great success. Stories have often been written about sustaining living things in nutrient media; few have realized the equivalent is done when necessary injections like insulin and cortisone are given. In a sense, the human body is thus a vast tube sustained in its living function by the periodic injections of chemicals which ordinarily would be manufactured by its own agencies, the glands.

Medicine is on the verge of some startling discoveries. Most likely these discoveries will emanate primarily from the laboratories of the glandular technicians, since the organs they study seem most vital to the human body. It is fantastic, how much of the body is really superfluous to life—only the glands and chemical-creating tissues are really vital!

TELEVISION AND THE DIAPHOTE

By MERRITT LINN



IN AN ALMOST Jules Vernian sequence, the antecedents of television have been traced back to roots existing in the last century—the eighteen-eighties! At that time a marvelously simple machine was constructed which in all essentials duplicated many of the principles of modern-day television. Called the "Diaphote", it was a device for transmitting pictures over wire, a device which worked, made a brief splash in scientific circles, then vanished inexplicably into the limbo of forgotten inventions.

It consisted of a circular disc covered with eighty or a hundred small insulated discs of a selenium-chromium-mercury amalgam, photosensitive to light. Wires led from each disc to another disc some distance away, and made of the same amalgam. Images strongly illuminated and placed before the first disc were "telegraphed in electrical impulses" to the second one. In a sense this was truly "wired television".

The technology of the time was hardly ready for any elaborations and developments of television—the incandescent lamp was just coming into its own—but it is a sad commentary on those times to think what might have sprung—and didn't—from all the ideas embodied in the "diaphote". Photo-electric cells, the principles of modulation, and any number of ideas basic to electrical technology were ready to be captured.

It is possible to trace back many inventions which contained the seeds of all the marvels of today, but experience has shown that *all* conditions must be favorable to the development of a given situation. Just as today all the facilities and techniques are ready for man's first plunge from this planet, yet the basic impulse is lacking, or some basic technical point is missing, and so for a decade or so more, we must wait. The people of the eighteen-eighties waited almost seventy years before the "diaphote" turned into TV!

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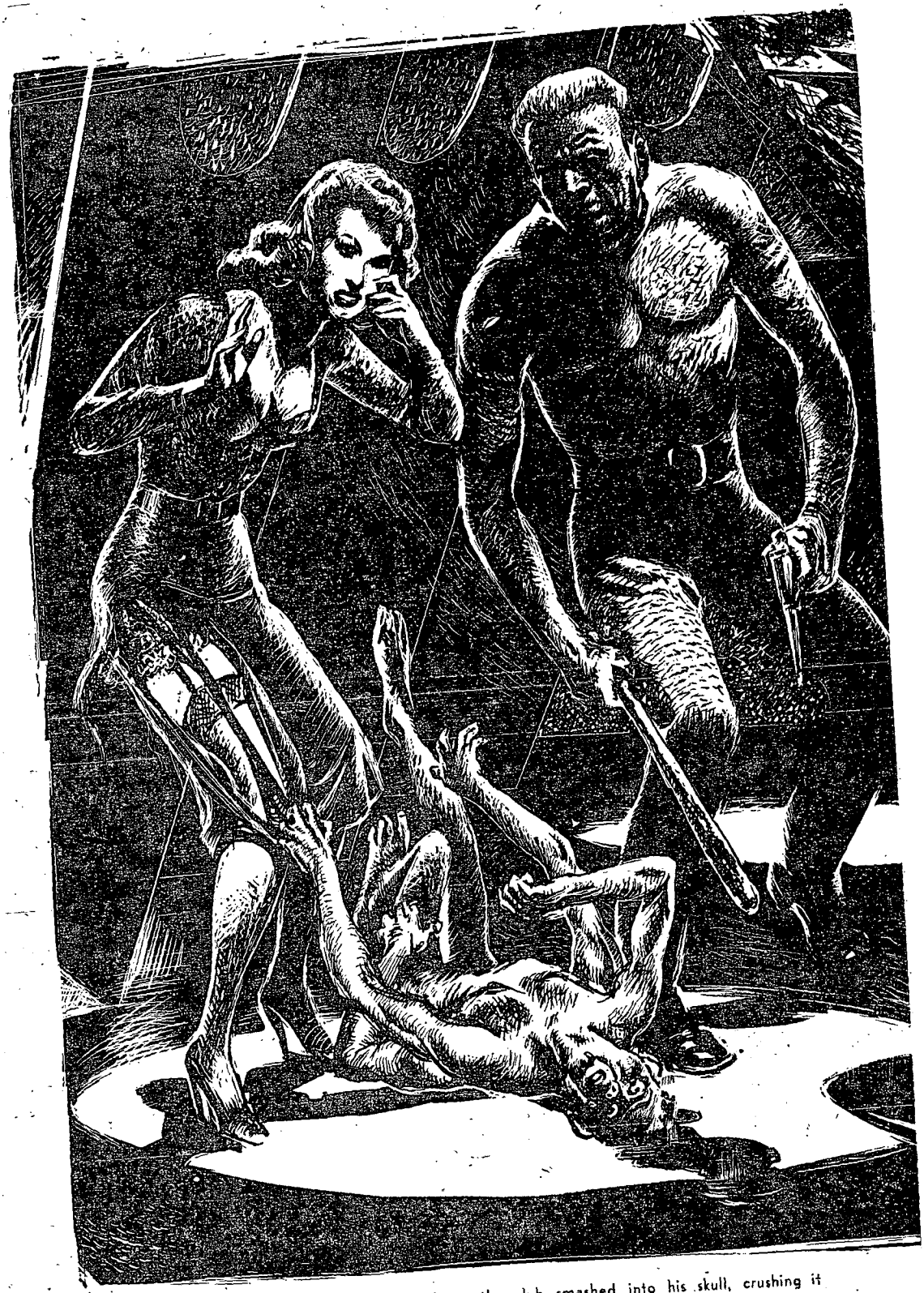

The fallen man's scream was cut off sharply as the club smashed into his skull, crushing it

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THIS PLANET FOR SALE

The alien galaxy had a strange hobby: they collected planets. And now they wanted to make Earth a star specimen!

By Ralph Sholto

THE INSTRUMENTS at Palomar and Wilson registered an alien body crossing the solar orbits. The intruder, whatever it was, pulled Mars forty thousand miles out of its lane. From all indications, the thing would be hauled around by Mercury and would dive straight into the sun. A rare occurrence and one the astrologicians looked forward to with interest.

There was one disturbing phenomenon, however. The space rover registered upon all instruments except the telescope and the camera. The plates revealed no uncharted body of any description, and the astro people chewed their nails and wondered.

"A surface without refraction. A

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body that repels the whole spectrum. Strangest thing I ever heard of."

"Ideal derelict in some respects. If it turned Earthward, we wouldn't have to worry about panic in the streets. The public wouldn't know anything about it until the tides began to go crazy."

"An invisible comet. Nice."

"Better notify Space Authority."

REX MORAN woke up with a lump on his head. He got the lump from rolling out of his bunk when the *Dog Star*—riding the little-used Green Lane from Neptune—appeared to hit a brick wall in open void and went end over end like a sardine can pitched toward the garbage dump.

Rex held onto a bunk support until the *Dog Star* righted itself, and then went storming up the companionway toward the pilot house. He tried the door. It was locked. He yelled, "Johnny! You damn fool! What the blue blazes you trying to do?"

There was no answer. Rex hit the door with his shoulder. It was not locked; only jammed. He staggered into the pilot house and found Johnny Calhoun folded up like an accordion under the port control panel. Johnny had a bump, too. He was out.

Rex checked all boards and found the auto-stabilizer had taken over, but on a new course. He picked shattered glass out of a few dials so the needles would clear, then gave his attention to Johnny. He hauled the bearded space veteran out from under the panel and slapped his face until a pair of squint eyes opened. Johnny said, "Who lowered the boom?"

"What the hell did you hit? You must have bashed in the nose of the ship."

Johnny got to his feet, staggered, grabbed the table. "Didn't hit nothing. What can you hit when there's nothing to hit? That screen was as empty as a jet cleaner's head."

Rex went over and scanned the screen. Clear. He swung the pilot's reflector in all directions. Nothing. "Empty space," he grunted, "and we go end over end. Off course, too. Thirty-six degrees off course."

"Then we're chasing something."

"What?"

"How do I know?"

"We got a blank screen, you goof. There's nothing to chase."

Johnny came over and stared doggedly into the screen. "Can't help that. If a ship hits something when nothing's there to hit, it's magnetic pull. What else? Some carcass spun us like a top, and we're hauling after it."

"Ever hear of a carcass you couldn't see?"

"Not up to ten minutes ago, but I have now."

"If we can't see it, what's to keep us from barging into it again?"

Johnny started to answer. Then his face—that part not covered by beard—went white. "You suppose we shook the sprinkler system loose?"

REX CURSED and dived for the door. He'd forgotten the sprinklers. At that very moment an acid spray could be turning the cargo into smoke. He raced aft, down the companionway, to the false wall that should have bulked off the fuel bins but didn't. He ran his hands over the smooth surface of the bulkhead, pressed a certain spot and caught in one hand a small disc of metal that fell away, revealing a tiny lens. He put his eye to the lens, then replaced the disc and went back to the pilot house.

"Cargo's okay. Piled up plenty, but all intact. We didn't start the spray."

Johnny had recovered. He sat on the pilot's cushion with the old cynical light in his eyes. "You know," he

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said, "that's a smart setup, but it ain't new."

"What're you talking about?"

"The acid spray. It reminds me of a book I read once. A real old book of how they smuggled the heathen Chinese onto the American West Coast two hundred years ago. Come a coast guard boat and they'd fasten chains to the yellow boys' legs and dump them overside. Acid's better, of course, but see what I mean? It ain't new."

"Shut up! The log wire's on. Now I'll have to uncap the box and cut out a section."

"Sorry," Johnny said, and went back to his scanning. "I better pull us back on course."

Rex went to the commissary and fried a mess of bacon. He broke out the coffee and had a pot steaming when Johnny came back from the pilot house.

"Can't get on course," Johnny said.

"What do you mean, can't get on course?"

"Just what I said. Magnetic pull: Something's hauling us thirty-degrees off. Not enough power in the jets to offset it. I tried like hell, but all we do is sunfish. There's something mighty big out there."

Johnny's dark, handsome face grew darker. "What the damn hell—"

"We've got to get loose! If it's a magnetic slip-stream we can get clear if you roost on the controls."

Johnny turned toward the door. "Okay. Bring me a cup of coffee. I'll go roost."

He took two steps, but that was all. Space stasis set in instantly. With no warning, they were like particles floating in heavy water. Johnny drifted up toward the ceiling. He turned slowly. Rex's feet idled past his nose and following the feet was a gob of brown coffee shaped like the inside of a cup but divorced entirely therefrom.

Rex growled, "What the hell," and the hot coffee touched his arm, scalding it.

Now came darkness. The lights did not go out. Rather, they were engulfed in an all-powerful cloud of darkness; a smothering black that came from nowhere to gulp down every light ray; an ink sponge blotting away all vision.

Johnny said, "This stuff is high frequency, whatever else it is. Not from inside. It comes through the hull. It's why we couldn't see that carcass. Light rays must bend and by-pass it."

"So you got it doped. That's swell. Helps a lot—now."

COLLEEN BARNUM didn't like her father coming to breakfast in his underwear. She said it was indecent. But Saul Barnum was the kind of a man who spurned convention and insisted upon being comfortable aboard his own ship.

He said, "Look, honey. There ain't a lot of difference beween a suit of long underwear and a space rig. They both cover you up. Besides, when I get up I'm hungry. I don't want to fuss around with no dressing until I got something in my belly. Serve up the eggs."

So Colleen served her father up a fried egg—right between the eyes as hard as she could peg it. "I told you I don't like you eating in your underwear! Now, go get your pants on!"

Saul wiped the mess off his face and stared at his daughter. Lord but she was pretty! A red-headed, streamlined hellion if he'd ever seen one.

"Honey, you shouldn't ought to do a thing like that."

"I'm tired of talking."

"A man's got some privileges aboard his own ship. Ain't nobody

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here but you and me. And don't I work like a dob trying to hit the jackpot and make you rich?" He continued to stare at her. She was prettiest, he thought, when she was mad. It was worth getting her riled up just to see the sight.

"Oh, of course! You lounge in the pilot house all day while I do everything else!"

"Somebody's got to pilot the ship."

"And these jackpot cargos you dream up. Snow-orchids from Pluto into Brazil of all places."

Saul scratched his chin. "Funny they wouldn't let me unload that cargo. They was prettier than any orchids on Terra."

"The Brazilians make their living by growing orchids. What did you expect them to do? Roll out a carpet for imports?"

"Well, maybe it was a mite shortsighted on my part, but—"

"And building blocks from the heavy asteroids."

"A good idea. That material can't be destroyed. It'd last forever."

"Sure, but when we went into the ways at Chicago, the blocks were so heavy we couldn't get them off the ship. You'll remember we had to go out beyond the pull and dump the whole load."

"The difference in atmosphere density *did* make a problem—"

"And what a problem. Go wash the egg off your face and put your pants on."

Saul continued to gaze at his daughter. She was sure built to interest the young buckos. Trouble was they shied away from her fire.

Then Saul was looking at his daughter upside down. He hung in space, over the table, and watched her make a complete revolution. He saw her clutch frantically at her skirts and wondered about it. There was no one there; only the two of them. Women were sure funny, he mused.

When he got around to wondering what had happened to the ship, it was too late to find out because a thick, penetrating darkness came in to blot out everything.

REX MORAN had found anchorage on the neon light bar in the commissary of the *Dog Star*. He gripped it with both hands and snarled at the luck that had brought him into this predicament. During all his space years, he'd stayed legitimate; had turned down the lucrative offers of the scoundrels, the blacklegs, the outlaw brotherhood. During those years, he'd never had a mishap; not so much as a torn fingernail nor even a mild space storm to knock him off course. During his honest flights, luck had smiled upon him and had allowed him to face starvation on an even keel.

But now, with his first dip into the lucrative sea of contraband, the fates cracked down on him; allowed invisible carcasses to pull him off course and hurl him into a stasis so strong it put out the lights.

He cursed fate for a while, then had his arms almost jerked out of their sockets as the stasis vanished and ship's gravity reasserted itself.

Johnny Calhoun did not fare so well. He'd found nothing to grab onto and hit the steel floor with all of his two hundred and fifty pounds of pull.

Rex got up and helped Johnny to his feet.

"Looks like we made it," Johnny grunted.

"I wonder if we've got any cargo left."

"To hell with the cargo. We're still alive, ain't we?"

"To hell with three-quarter of a million bucks? You must have a concussion."

"Never mind me. Let's find out where we are and how we're pointing."

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Both men limped from minor bruises as they made the companionway and went forward. There they found the smaller astrogation instruments spread all over the floor, but that seemed to be the extent of the damage. The port dials showed the *Dog Star* to be moving in a lazy arc on the minor units of acceleration not killed by the stasis. Other dials proved the astrocourse to be entirely off.

The main point of interest, however, was the radar plate. Moving across its center was a huge carcass, equivalent in size to Terra at twenty thousand miles. The carcass was the center of the *Dog Star's* present orbit.

"There it is," Rex said grimly.

"Sure. Any fool can see it now. But where was it before? How come it pops up out of nowhere when we're right on top of it?"

"It's wearing an overcoat. All wrapped up in some kind of a stasis-bank. That's why we couldn't spot it. But from the pull it must be made of pure metal."

"Let's give a look."

REX WAS already focusing the reflector. He snapped the switch and the reflector plate lit up. There it was. A great shining globe turning lazily in space. Its axis stood upright with the plane of the ecliptic and its rotation speed would have given it approximately a six-hour day had there been a sun in the vicinity.

But there wasn't. The sky was entirely opaque, glittering like mother-of-pearl, and all the light seemed to reflect from the carcass itself.

"Let's get in closer," Rex said.

"Okay, but look out we don't get pulled down."

Johnny went skillfully to work on the controls. He shortened the orbit and studied the result. "She pulls hard, but the jets are strong enough now. How come the pull out beyond the stasis more than offset the jets when it doesn't in here?"

"I think that stasis envelope weakened them. From the time we went end over end, we probably weren't building more than two units."

"Could be. We're coming in now. What's down there?"

"We're over a city of some kind. The biggest damn city I ever saw."

"How big does the planet figure?"

"I'd say pretty small. Maybe two thousand miles in diameter."

"We'll swing around it."

After a period of silence, Rex said, "Good lord! It's all city. Completely built up from one pole to the other. Every square mile of this planet has construction on it."

"Anybody around?"

"Not a soul. Either it's deserted or the people are staying under cover. Maybe they're afraid of us."

"I don't think so. I saw a space port back there. Obviously they're acquainted with interspacial flying. If that's true they'd have weapons. They wouldn't go under cover for one ship."

"A space port. Why the hell didn't you tell me? We'll go in."

"I suppose we might as well. We probably couldn't get out through that stasis without wrecking ourselves. If they're friendly they'll maybe show us a way."

"And if they ain't friendly?"

Rex shrugged. "We can't spend the rest of our lives up here."

JOHNNY cut the ship into a tight arc to come back over his old orbit toward the port. Halfway around, he yelled and hit the controls with both hands and both feet. The *Dog Star* went on its jets and shot straight up.

"They're throwing rocks!" Johnny yelled, and the whole radar plate was blotted out by an object hurtling past. Johnny righted the ship as Rex

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swung the reflector from one point to another. "There it is," he said. "It's—it's a ship! A big, slow baby. The *Flying Boxcar*. Ever hear of it?"

"Seems like I did. But what's it doing out here trying to ram us?"

"I think it's out of control. It's doing a spiral and a loop all at the same time. It must have just come through that black envelope."

"I hope they crash," Johnny muttered. "It'd serve them right."

"They're getting hold of it now. Straightening away."

Johnny snapped the radio switch. "Hey, you damn idiots! Who're you trying to kill?"

The receiver crackled and a reply seared the walls of the *Dog Star's* pilot house. "Dón't you dare talk to me like that!"

Johnny's jaw sagged. "Holy kraut! It's a female."

Rex kept his eyes glued to the reflector. "Watch it. They've wheeled around and they're going in. She may be a female, but she cut you off from that landing ramp nice and neat."

"That's courtesy. Always depend on a dame to horn in."

Johnny took another swing around the orbit and came in again. "Have I got clearance?"

"Plenty. They moved to the upper end of the ramp."

"Damn considerate. I expected they'd camp plumb in the middle of it. What do you suppose they're doing around here?"

"Probably got pulled in the same as we did." Rex swung the reflector arm around and pushed the instrument down on its bracket in front of Johnny. "I'll go back and tune down the jets. Give me the word."

The *Dog Star* rose neatly into the ramp under Johnny Calhoun's expert guidance. Rex cut the jets and the two spacemen met at the port ramp.

"There's plenty of air outside," Johnny said. "I saw a dame and a man get out of that crate ahead of us."

They threw their weight on the port locks. "Funny thing," Johnny said. "They must have big times on that ship. The guy came out in his underwear and the dame sent him back—to get his pants on maybe."

The air locks wheezed and the port swung open. "Here goes nothing," Rex said. He loosened the hand gun at his belt and stepped out onto the ramp. Johnny followed and they stood side by side—sharply on the alert—in this strange silent place.

COLLEEN BARNUM did not wait for her father after she sent him back for his outer garments. She went on down the ramp toward the gate.

But no passengers were in sight. No officials, no spectators, no living thing. The port, while following practical lines, was different from any Colleen had ever seen. The ship-ways were wider, for one thing. They would accomodate far larger ships than had ever been built, to Colleen's knowledge. Also, the entire port, the running fields, the fences and gates, even the buildings themselves, were constructed of the same material; a metal resembling aluminum, yet obviously far harder and heavier than that Terran metal. What windows Colleen could see were of clear glass, and they stared out like sightless eyes.

All in all, there was a sinister, brooding loneliness about the port that made Colleen glad of the second ship, which was even now curving in for a landing. It was the *Dog Star* out of Minneapolis. Colleen had heard of it and the picturesque pair who plied the space lanes and made its name known as far out as the lost worlds beyond Saturn.

Colleen went through the gate and moved up the fenced-off lane toward the dispatch building. Where *was*

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everybody anyhow? It was beyond conception that a modern port like this one would be deserted on a completely built-up planet. Yet, not so much as a bug stirred on the metal floor over which she walked.

Now Colleen, glancing down at this floor, noticed something else. She was leaving footprints behind her. The floor and the fences and the gates were covered with a fine silver dust. Colleen rubbed her finger along the fence railing. She uncovered a streak of bright metal and realized the dullness of all the surfaces around her was caused by the dust.

She wiped her finger and shivered slightly, though the atmosphere was exceedingly warm. She glanced back to see the *Dog Star* roar into the ways and cut its jets. If that racket doesn't bring anyone, she thought, there just isn't anybody around.

Yet, she had the feeling she was being watched; that eyes followed her every step from some hidden vantage point. She shrugged off the feeling. It was foolish. Only through fear would the natives of this place hide away. And they certainly wouldn't be afraid of two unarmed space freighters.

COLLEEN pushed through the big glass door into the dispatch offices. Dead silence greeted her from the bright, vacant desks, the empty chairs, the all-metal vastness of the high ceiling. She walked on, her heels clicking out an echo on the uncarpeted floor.

Another glass door gave off into what had probably been a waiting room. Here, a glass roof stood half open to the eternal haze of the queer sky over this world, and the silvery dust was again in evidence.

Colleen marveled anew. Even the great new port in Detroit, where the sleek liners took off for the far reaches of space, was nothing like this. Beside this weirdly deserted behemoth, the Detroit port looked like a wayside freight depot.

Another door invited. Colleen opened it and stepped into a sumptuously furnished office. Here the monotony of the bright metal was broken by carpets of flaming hues; oddly shaped, but practical, metal furniture was upholstered in rich fabrics, the like of which the girl had never seen.

Then, from somewhere, came proof that the strange metal planet was not lifeless—footsteps, running footsteps with a touch of desperation in their beat.

The noise came from beyond the far wall and sounded as though the creature, whatever it was, would approach through some long, echoing hallway.

Suddenly a door flew open and a terrified creature burst into the room. It was almost naked, its skin a sickly, unhealthy white. It had four arms and two legs, with short, bristly black hair covering its skull. Its feet were huge, comically so, but there was nothing comic in the terror radiated by this creature. That quality was of a universal nature.

While Colleen stood frozen to the carpet, the pitiful creature came close and went to its knees before her. In its eyes was eloquent entreaty.

Then came the croaking words: "Save me! Please save me! Don't let him kill—"

The man, still clutching Colleen's knees, twisted around as a third person entered the room; a brutal-faced, stocky man carrying a small ray gun in one hand and a club in the other. The sight of Colleen held him for a moment. Then, with a snarl of satisfaction, he moved forward.

The club came down in a short, vicious arc. The groveling man screamed—his scream cut off as the club smashed into his skull, killing

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him instantly.

Colleen stood frozen, sheer consternation imprisoning her. The killer did not even lower his eyes to the corpse slumped on the floor. They held steadily on Colleen and there was great appreciation within them. He holstered his gun and his free hand pushed out toward her, almost reached her breast.

Colleen stared at the hand as though it were the head of a snake; watched it stop and draw back, regretfully. She raised her eyes and saw a look of sudden fear in the killer's face.

He turned his attention to the body on the floor, bent over and took it by the collar. Then, without further ceremony, he dragged it across the room and out through the far door. The door closed. The incident was ended.

Colleen shook her head like a groggy prizefighter. She blinked rapidly, held her eyes tightly closed for a moment; then opened them and surveyed the room.

HAD IT actually happened? Had a murder been done at her very feet in this luxurious room on an apparently deserted aluminum planet? Possibly it had been some sort of an illusion. But any such idea was speedily dissolved when Colleen glanced toward the floor. The killer had not dragged all of his victim away. There was some blood on the carpet.

Colleen turned toward the door through which she had entered. She suddenly wanted no more of this bright brooding place where casual violence seemed the order of things. Her hand reached the knob, turned it. A quiet, cultured voice sounded from nearby.

"Welcome, my dear. Won't you sit down?"

Colleen whirled. A third man had come from somewhere and now stood by a desk across the room. He smiled. The startled girl was surprised not so much at his sudden arrival as by the man himself.

He was a Terran beyond all doubt, and a magnificent specimen; tall, broad-shouldered, past middle age, and a picture of perfect health and well-being. His clothing was of cloth and metal; loose-fitting but of the richest materials.

Again the soft, cultured voice: "I would suggest you sit down and make yourself comfortable, my dear. You are not leaving. The door is locked."

And so it was. Colleen twisted the knob and pulled. Nothing happened. She turned and leaned against the door like a tigress at bay. "What's the idea? Who are you? What are you doing here?"

The man laughed gently. "I might ask you the same questions. And it would be more fitting if they came from me. After all—you are the intruder, not I."

"All right. I apologize. Now let me go."

The man shook his head. "On the contrary. I prefer that you stay. You are the first woman to grace these brand-new buildings with your presence. I find it quite agreeable."

"What are you talking about? What is this place?"

"It is a new world—in transit. A brand-new planet built to specifications and now in the process of delivery."

Colleen's panic was gone. There was a certain tenseness in her manner, but she was again master of herself. "Are you aware that a man was just brutally murdered in this room?"

HE RAISED his heavy eyebrows. He continued to smile; a fatherly grimace that was beginning to annoy Colleen. He said, "You say a man was brutally murdered? In the first place, it was hardly a man. And cer-

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tainly it was not murder. Rather, let us say, necessary extermination. You see, we have guaranteed to deliver this planet free of vermin. There will be more of these so-called murders before we reach our destination."

Colleen was far more angry than afraid now. The callous words chilled her into a fury.

"I think you're mad," she said. "I'm convinced you're some kind of a dangerous lunatic. I'd suggest you let me out of here immediately. On Terra—"

The balance of Colleen's words never came because the man made a disdainful motion with his hand. "Terra. Hmmm. And spoken with pride, too. We have some plans for your Terra in the not too distant future. Another reason we could not possibly let you and your party leave."

"What are you talking about? What kind of plans?"

The man seemed to be enjoying himself hugely. "We have an order for a planet of about that size. Our engineers have debated as to whether Mars or Terra most perfectly fills the bill. I'm sure it will be Terra."

Maybe this creature is mad, Colleen thought, but he speaks with a certain cold authority that is frightening.

"I don't understand a word of what you say."

He regarded her through amused eyes. "You Twenty-Third Sun creatures are certainly the most naive of the lot. I've met others of your group. Martians, Venusians, Neptunians. You consider yourselves so great, so intelligent, so full of cosmic awareness. But the absolute reverse is true. You remind me so much of children playing in a yard; children who consider the confines of that yard to be the boundaries of the universe. From your tiny pinpoints of planets, you've gone out a few miles to where space begins to bend, so you think that's all there is to it. How stupid."

He went on: "The truth of the matter is, you know nothing at all about the vast cosmos around you. Your tiny sun is situated far down in a neglected corner of it. You know nothing of the Seven Great Suns, any one of which would completely fill all the void you are capable of visualizing. You know nothing of the traffic and commerce that goes on between planets on which your Twenty-Third Sun would be capable of starting only a small bonfire. Really, with your little trips to Jupiter, Saturn, and even the Outer Planetoids, you haven't yet gotten more than three steps from your back door."

Colleen wanted no more of this colossal idiot's ravings. And he seemed to sense her sudden disinterest, because he changed the subject. "Come, my dear. You are a most refreshing bit of femininity. I have plans for you. Come."

He moved across the room toward Colleen. "And by the way, let me introduce myself. My name is Brother William. That is how you will always address me."

Colleen, backed finally into a corner, fought like a lost soul. But for all the good it did, she could have saved her energy. Brother William took her under his arm. Chuckling, he carried her from the room.

SAUL BARNUM came out of the *Flying Boxcar* with his pants on, to find company at the foot of the ramp. "Name's Barnum," he said with affability. "Sorry about cutting you off the ramp. That was my daughter Colleen's doing. She figures ladies should always go first."

"I'm Rex Moran. This is my partner Johnny Calhoun. Any idea where we are?"

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"Damned if I know. We went through some kind of a dark cloud that ended us over end. Kind of embarrassing, floating around like a tadpole inside your own ship."

"We know all about it," Johnny sympathized.

"Well, when we got clear this funny carcass was staring us in the face. We landed."

"Where did your daughter go?"

"Out snooping it over, I guess. She always was a hard one to keep under your thumb."

"We'd better hunt for her," Rex said. "This place looks deserted, but you never can tell."

"We can follow her footprints. A mite dusty around here. Looks like nobody ain't swept up lately."

The three men started off in the direction Colleen had gone. But they had taken only a half dozen steps before Rex stopped suddenly.

"Trouble."

"What do you mean?"

"Over there."

Johnny and Saul turned in the rearward direction Rex indicated. They saw a squad of ten men march with military precision from a hangar across the ways and goose-step toward them.

"We've been jobbed," Saul muttered. "Grab a rafter and swing."

"No use running. They're armed. They could cut us down before we got five feet."

"Then what do we do?" Johnny asked. "Stand here?"

"That's it. Set your gun at purple. If I give the signal, get yourself as many as you can."

"Me, I got no gun," Saul said. "Guns are dangerous. You can get hurt that way."

The contingent was moving across the running lanes directly toward the three spacemen. The ten soldiers were of a cut; stocky, brutal-faced, but with eyes front, shoulders stiff, and each man full of military bearing.

They came closer, their feet beating the metal floor in even cadence. Then, eyes front, they marched past the three Terrans and continued on their way. It was as if they had not seen the men.

"Well, I'll be damned," Johnny breathed.

NEITHER Rex nor Saul Barnum had anything to say. Their eyes remained on the goose-stepping squad until it reached what was apparently its objective—the entrance to one of the tool houses flanking the left side of the field. There, the soldiers broke ranks and entered the building single file.

Immediately, new action broke out in another spot; further down the line of tool houses, a door flew open and a pair of strange, pale creatures with huge feet ran out onto the field. Obviously they had been hiding and were being flushed out by the soldiers moving through the connecting inner doors of the tool houses.

The strange, terrified pair headed straight for the ramp of the *Flying Boxcar*. While Rex and Johnny were still staring in amazement at their oversized feet, they dropped into a posture of supplication and clawed at Saul Barnum's belt. "Please! Please help us. We'll be killed. Save us!"

The soldiers, emerging from the tool house now, did not reform into a parade unit. Instead, they spread out and advanced upon the five by the ship. One of them raised an odd-looking gun. He did not appear to fire it, but a large dent slapped into the impervium hull of the *Flying Boxcar* and Johnny Calhoun let out an indignant yelp. He brought up his color gun and snapped the switch.

Two of the soldiers dropped to their knees as their visible flesh turned a deep purple and their eyes bulged horribly. Then they got up and came on

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again, staggering, but still alive and dangerous.

Johnny and Rex looked at each other in amazement. The men had been hit and they still lived! This was incredible—impossible—but the two spacemen had no time to comment thereon. Saul had already started up the ramp of the *Flying Boxcar*. Shouting, the two large-footed creatures leaped forward and dragged him back.

"Trap! Trap!" They babbled.

With this, they went lumbering around the end of the ship, motioning to be followed. Rex and Johnny crouched for a moment in the partial shelter of the ramp and sent two streams of purple death winging toward the seemingly imperishable soldiers. The color-charges brought them down one after another as new dents, from return fire, began pockmarking the hull of the ship.

"They ain't human," Johnny muttered, still firing, the gun hot in his hands. "They keep getting up."

"We'd better follow the guys with the feet," Rex said. "They must know more about the setup than we do."

SAUL BARNUM was already taking this advice. He was around the hull of the ship and pelting after the pale, terrified objects of the soldiers' wrath.

Johnny and Rex followed at top speed. A broad expanse of open field lay between them and safety. Without consultation, they went into a routine that bespoke long experience in getting out of tight places.

First Johnny dropped to one knee and sprayed all visible pursuers with deadly color ray. They dropped like ten pins but always staggered to their feet to come forward again.

At a yell from Rex, Johnny stopped firing and began running while Rex' gun took up the task of slowing up pursuit. Johnny ran on past Rex some fifty yards, yelled, dropped to one knee and again covered his partner's retreat.

In this manner they crossed the huge field and approached the door which Saul Barnum was holding open, yelling the while: "Come on, you idiots. This ain't no time to pick daisies. Get your hides over here before they're blown off!"

Johnny and Rex sprang through the doorway, turned and hurled themselves against the panel, driving it into place. As they shoved, Johnny found time for a wide-eyed comment, "The whole squad is still coming. They been killed a dozen times and they still come on!"

"Something funny about them," Rex said.

"You're telling me!"

They found themselves in a long passageway, low-ceilinged, and lit by the same strange radiance that seemed to pervade this metal world. On down the passageway, Saul was gesturing. "Come on! What're you waiting for? Our pals went this way."

The two spacemen holstered their guns and ran. They caught up with Saul and then the three of them overtook the pair who were waiting, ill at ease, by another door.

"What about the girl?" Rex snapped.

Saul was breathing heavily. "What girl?"

"Your daughter, you punch-drunk jet wiper! You mean to tell me you forgot about her?"

"Well, not exactly, but being as there ain't anything we can do for her at the moment, I figured to stay alive so maybe I could do something later."

Rex' disgust was not hidden, but Johnny, far more practical than his partner, came to Saul's rescue. "Well,

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he's right in a way. What the hell *can* we do now? You want to wade back through that iron army?"

Saul was urging them on after the pale men who had already gone through the doorway. "Colleen's a pretty able little minx. She'll leave her mark on anybody that crosses her."

"I'm damned if I ever saw such a father," Rex growled. "We'll catch up with those jokers and find but if there's a way we can go around to the other side."

But the jokers were not easily caught up with. Their big feet slapped echoes out of the tunnel walls as they rushed forward in a headlong manner.

AND NOW Johnny and Rex noted a change in their surroundings. They had been aware, since their arrival at the port, of the unused, virgin newness of everything about them. But down in these lower levels to which they had come, signs of great age were apparent. No bright aluminum-like metal here. Only ancient stone, dank underground moss, dripping water, and the smell of decay.

As they moved on after their new guides, Johnny thought to wonder: "How come those big-footed freaks weren't afraid of us? They seem to be afraid of everybody else around this silly place."

"It was probably a matter of pure desperation. They figured they were through regardless and we offered a possibility."

"I noticed another thing."

"What was that?"

"They spoke in English, but if they belong to any planet I ever heard of I'll wash their feet for them—which would be one hell of a big job."

"It's peculiar, but not very important now. I'm wondering what happened to the girl. Do you suppose some of those soldiers grabbed her?"

Johnny refused to worry about that. He said, "There's another thing. How come our fire wouldn't stop them? Did you ever hear of a living thing the purple ray wouldn't kill?"

Rex did not answer, because Johnny's question could have been the signal for what followed. A red-faced soldier stepped from a crypt in the passage where he had evidently been hiding.

The crypt was not two feet from the spacemen and the soldier brushed Rex' elbow as he went by. But, strangely, he made no motion to harm either of them. Rather, he ignored them and moved on ahead toward Saul and the two pale ones.

Rex and Johnny glanced at each other. Two faces full of question marks. "I don't get it," Johnny whispered. "Couldn't he see us?"

"I've got a hunch he's after the freaks and no one else. What does that suggest?"

"That we ought to stop him."

"It's not what I meant, but it's a good idea." Johnny raised his gun and his voice at the same time. "Hey—stupid! Turn around!"

The soldier kept right on going.

"I hate to shoot anybody in the back," Johnny muttered.

But there seemed no choice because the soldier, now in range of Saul Barnum and the two guides, raised his gun to fire.

Rex and Johnny sent a twin color barrage of heavy purple at the soldier's back. The terrible rays struck with enough force to hammer the lives out of a hundred men. The soldier tensed and quivered. He spun around slowly, dropping his own gun, writhing in indescribable agony.

"Good lord!" Johnny breathed. "What's he made of? Why doesn't he fall?"

The soldier finally slumped to the floor of the passageway. Johnny and Rex moved forward. Saul Barnum

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and the two palid natives ceased their retreat and came back to where the soldier's still body lay. Rex was cleaning his gun. Johnny stood staring in awe at the body on the floor. "What a man," he muttered. "What a man!"

"He isn't a man—entirely. Only partly so."

THE THREE spacemen turned upon the owner of the voice—one of the two men they had saved from death. "I am Lugo," he said. "This is Morkon, my friend. We are the true natives of this planet. It was known to us as Lurd and we were happy, prosperous and peace-loving. So peaceful were we that—"

"Skip the history for a while. Let's take the important things first. You said this joker wasn't a man—only partly so. Could you spread that out a little thinner?"

Lugo dropped to his knees beside the body. "I wonder if I could borrow a knife from anyone?"

Johnny took a six-inch blade from its guard on his belt and handed it to the Lurdan. The man took it, tore back the tunic from the soldier's body and plunged the knife into the torso. A dark, sluggish fluid oozed forth from the wound, to turn almost instantly into a gummy ebon material. Now Lugo thrust his hand into the soldier's vitals and appeared to be tearing something loose from its moorings. With an energetic jerk he brought forth a small metal box to which had been attached several small tubes.

"The heart," he said. "The other organs are of metal too. If you take the skin from the head you will find it to be a skull of silver containing nothing more than a series of electrical relays. This is one of the Brother's robots; a triumph of constructional skill. After the skeleton is assembled, the human skin is overlayed by a grafting process that would amaze the cleverest physicians from your Terra."

"Do they run on electricity?" Rex asked.

"Not exactly. A higher vibrational force makes them function. It can be likened to electricity, but it goes right through any electrical control yet devised. It can be controlled only by metal power which is, after all, the highest rate of vibration known."

Johnny was not interested in detailed, semi-technical description. "How come these robots passed us up out on the field? And here in the passageway, this one did it again. Don't we rate as enemies?"

"No. We are the sole worry of the Brothers at the moment. We are considered vermin who must be eradicated from the planet before it is delivered to the purchaser. The robots have been indoctrinated with but a single command: "Kill Lurdans. Hunt out Lurdans and slay them." Lugo wiped off the knife and handed it back to Johnny. He looked down at the broken robot and shuddered.

"They are dreadful enemies to have. They are partially human but have the unreasoning tenacity of cold metal. They never sleep. Endlessly, day after day, they hunt us down. They are as implacable as time itself."

"And as hard to kill," Rex said.

SAUL HAD picked up the mechanical heart and was examining it with interest.

"Look," Johnny said. "Every time you answer one question, it gives us ground to ask three new ones. What's this about the Brothers and a buyer for this planet and how come you speak English and—"

"Skip it," Rex said. "There'll be

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plenty of time for questions. What do you know about a girl who left one of our ships and disappeared? She went into one of the buildings on the other side of the ways. Can we get over there without crossing the field again?"

Morkon, the second Lurdan, spoke up for the first time. "One of the Brothers probably got her."

"Who in hell are the Brothers?" Johnny asked.

"They are of your race, I believe. Originally they came from Terra, but that was a long time ago. The Brothers are a ruthless band of adventurers who sell planets."

"*Sell* Planets! Listen! What kind of—?"

"It's perfectly true. They deal mainly with the World-Nations of the Great Galaxy and the peoples beyond this time and space sphere."

Rex glanced grimly at Johnny. "Looks like we don't get around much, chum."

"You're right. We need briefing." He turned back to Morkon. "Just where is this Great Galaxy and what in blazes is a space and time sphere?"

"Being from a backward sphere, you'd hardly be expected to know," Lurdan broke in with a sad smile. "A superficial explanation of Cosmophysics is necessary before you can begin to understand. You see, the universe as you know it is a relatively small unit of the infinite. Without the proper transportation equipment, the best you could ever do would be to travel in an everlasting circle. At the outer dimensions of this universe, as with all others, time and space become one and form circular boundaries; so the universe you know can be likened to a bubble in which you go around and around."

"A big bubble," Johnny muttered.

"On the contrary, a very small bubble. There are time and space spheres so large they could contain this universe a million times over."

"We'll go into that later," Rex said. "Right now we're interested in these Brothers and what they've done with Saul's daughter."

"They've probably killed her."

Saul straightened sharply from the mechanical heart he had been examining. "What'd they do a thing like that for? Why'd they want to kill Colleen?"

THIS WAS too much for even the hardened Johnny. He looked at Saul in amazement. "You're the damnedest character I ever met. Your daughter's maybe being killed and you stand there fiddling with a gadget."

Saul shrugged. "You been in this game as long as I have, you'll learn to take things easier, son. Nobody's never killed Colleen yet, but I'm all set to help hunt. Which way do we go?"

Johnny turned away in disgust.

"Hunting would be useless, I'm afraid," Lugo said. "We had better go to our Hidden Place where all the Lurdans congregate. One of them might have news of the girl."

"Okay," Rex said. "Lead the way."

The Lurdans, padding along on their grotesque feet, started off down the corridor which spiraled ever deeper into the body of the planet. But the trail they made was not easily followed, because now and again they pushed aside a boulder, crawled under it, and came upon a new tunnel. The winding trip continued until they came at last to a smooth blank wall. Lugo tapped it with a fragment of rock—tapped out a code—after which the whole panel moved upward, revealing another passage.

This last corridor was a short one,

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giving into a vast domed room, lit but dimly by the weird natural radiance of the planet. The place was crudely furnished and had much the appearance of a vast refugee camp. There were perhaps two hundred great-footed males and females in the cave together with a few children of the race. The Lurdans sat about in pairs and groups, their sole objective apparently the killing of time.

"This is all that is left of us," Morkon said with bitterness. "The Brothers struck like a silent wind, hit us without mercy. A world of two million souls almost annihilated over night. Now only a handful of us are left, waiting here like vermin to be slain."

"But why would these Brothers do a thing like that?" Saul asked.

"They got an order for a planet somewhere in the Great Galaxy and our world happened to conform to the required specifications. So the Brothers, needing a carcass around which to build the new planet, selected ours and went about exterminating our population. They got all but a handful of us and then pulled our planet to an island universe they own called Zyxtas, out beyond the Eighth Dimension. There they stripped and completely rebuilt it. Now they are making delivery. By the time we arrive at our destination, wherever it is, they expect their robots to have exterminated the last remnant of the old population."

Johnny turned suddenly to Rex. "Look! What about our cargo? Maybe we could?"

"Shut up! What are we—a couple of boy scouts? There's a fortune tied up in that cargo!"

"Oh, sure. I just thought—"

"Quit thinking. Our job is to find out how to get off this damned aluminum ball and set our course again."

"Then how come you been sounding off about Barnum's daughter—going to her rescue!"

Rex scowled. "Maybe that's a little different. After all, they're Terrans. A guy tries to give his own kind a break."

His partner grinned wickedly. "How about giving Morostans a break at a thousand credits a head—"

REX TURNED savagely on the bearded Johnny Calhoun. "Listen, you space-bum! If you're looking for a busted skull, you're hunting in the right place."

Saul Barnum perked up with bird-like interest. "What's this about Morostans?"

"Pull in your long beak, grandpa," Johnny grinned, "or my friend here'll tie a bow knot in it. He ain't a guy to fuss with."

"No offense. Just neighborly interest."

"Well, get neighborly about your own affairs. Let ours alone."

The two Lurdans wisely refrained from commenting on the friction among their benefactors. But now the group had arrived at the local point of the great gathering place. There, additional Lurdans waited with stricken, hopeless faces. There was some interest in the three Terrans, but these people seemed in such depths of despair that nothing could bring any semblance of hope to their faces.

Lugo and Morkon entered into conversation with their fellow Lurdans, but a strange language was used and the Terrans could get no meaning therefrom.

Finally Lugo turned to Rex and said, "I have news of your companion's daughter."

Saul Barnum jumped up eagerly. "What about my Colleen? Is she safe?"

"Not safe, I'm afraid," Lugo said. "It has been reported that one of

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our fellows was killed by a robot over in the new building by the spaceport. His companion escaped and came back to report a rather beautiful girl was seen in the building. One of the Brothers found her there and put her in the dungeons."

Rex had been listening with narrowed eyes. "Maybe, and maybe not. I wonder if you're on the level. There's something funny here."

The Lurdans seemed genuinely distressed. "Please don't be angry," Morkon begged. "You saved our lives. We are very grateful. Certainly we would not—"

"I'll decide that. How come all the rest of these people use the native lingo—I suppose that's what it is—while you two speak perfect English?"

Lugo smiled. "There were various levels of intelligence and learning among us. Morkon and I were two of the Elder Students, men who spent their lives in pursuit of learning. I doubt if there is a language in any time-sphere with which we are not familiar."

Rex was only partly mollified. He eyed Lugo suspiciously while the latter regarded him with a weary smile. "We were students in other branches of learning also, my friend. We know people. We understand human nature."

"What are you driving at?"

"Only this. Some seem to regard kindliness, humanity, compassion, as qualities to be hidden from the light of day."

"Double talk," Johnny grunted.

Lugo's smile deepened but he kept his eyes on Rex. "You, for instance, have a remarkably soft heart. You are a sentimentalist and as generous as all outdoors. But you won't admit it even to yourself, and you keep it hidden under a cloak of synthetic savageness."

Rex sneered at the old man. "For all your brains you seem to have landed in a hell of a hole," he said.

"We made one mistake. We were peaceful and took peaceful intentions among others for granted." His smile became one of bitterness. "This time-space scheme in which we all live is a bad one for the peaceful and the unarmed."

Before Rex could reply, the keen old Lurdan got in one more shaft. "Another thing: whatever mistake you have made, whatever sin is eating at your conscience—fear not. You will not follow the path of evil to its ultimate end. You have already proven that."

"Cut it out!" Rex roared. "Where are these caverns? We'll go down and get the girl and then blast off of this damn fool carcass."

"I'm afraid that would be equivalent to suicide," Morkon said. "The caverns are well guarded by the robots, as well as by solid rock and steel bars. Three men would have little chance of fighting through."

"But one man might slip in if he were careful and courageous enough," Lugo murmured.

Rex looked swiftly around. "I'll go find her. You and Saul stay here, Johnny. If more of those robots come, you can at least hold them off with one color-gun."

"Wait a minute—" Johnny bristled.

But Rex had already taken Lugo by the arm and was leading him away from the group. "Show me how to get to these dungeons . . . ." That was all Johnny could hear before they went out of earshot.

COLLEEN, cold, hungry, terrified, crouched against cold stone in the dim light and gave way to tears. She had grown tired of fighting, and

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had suffered about all the humiliation a girl could take without tears.

After the dungeon door had closed upon her and the final humiliation had been consummated, she gave shivering attention to her cell and found the ten-foot-square room to be utterly impregnable. Cut into solid rock, the thickness of its walls could have been thousands of feet for all anyone knew.

With escape beyond the realm of possibility, Colleen crouched against the wall and waited for the fateful sound of footsteps. They would come —that she knew. The even, unhurried tread of Brother William returning for his prize. Colleen shuddered and tried not to think of the future.

While she was occupied in keeping her mind a blank, the footsteps intruded upon her ears. He was returning. Colleen gritted her teeth and girded her resolution to fight again. *I'll always fight,* she told herself. *I'll fight right up to the end.*

Then a voice, soft, almost a whisper. "Hey—you. Anybody in there?"

Colleen's hopes soared with such suddenness that it made her giddy. She strove to speak, but words wouldn't come. She heard a soft curse and the tread diminishing. She leaped to the grated door. "Please—please. I'm here. Help me. Who are you?"

"Sssh. Not so loud! Want to bring a flock of robots down on us? I'm Rex Moran. I been hunting around down here for two hours."

She could see him now, or at least his face, through the high grate she could just use by standing on tiptoe. "Thank God you've come," she whispered.

"Stand aside. I'm going to blast this door."

Pressed against the cold granite wall, Colleen heard the sound of the color gun and saw the agony of wood and metal as the section of door around the lock burned and melted into nothing. The door swung open.

"Please," Colleen called, her voice rising in desperation. "Please, don't come in."

"What the hell! What do you mean don't come in?"

"Because I'm—I'm naked! I haven't got a stitch!"

Rex's voice sounded a little like the snarl of a baited tiger. "You mean those bastards—"

"There was only one of them. He carried me here."

"Did he—"

"He just—sort of used his hands. But he locked me in here and then made me give him my garments one by one through the window. He said if I didn't he'd come in and take them. The—the beast seemed to enjoy it hugely—said he was seeing to it I didn't go anywhere."

"We can't hang around here talking," Rex whispered savagely, "and I haven't any clothes for you. You'll have to follow me down the passageway to where I killed the last robot. Come on."

COLLEEN, wrapping cold arms around herself, stepped out into the passageway. Ahead of her was Rex Moran's broad back. She moved up close and, when he reached a hand around behind him, she touched it timidly.

"Keep close," Rex said. "It isn't far. We should be there in a minute."

But there was some delay. It came when Rex suddenly whirled upon Colleen. The girl crouched, terror-stricken, able only to moan "Don't—please don't," but with the inward conviction that all men were the same. This spaceman was no different from the horrible Brother William. Get a girl alone and helpless and—

Rex reached forth and got her by the hair, but only to hurl her rudely around behind him as he raised his

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color-gun and sent a stream of purple down the passageway.

The approaching robot stumbled, went to its knees, got up and tried to raise its pistol. Rex knocked the pistol into a smoking mass with another blast of purple. The robot looked at the place where its fingers and the pistol had been, then stalked doggedly forward.

But Rex had developed a new technique in fighting these monsters. He knocked the robot down again and leaped forward, knife in hand for the kill. He slashed the blade down into the robot's chest, savagely gouged out a hole as the flesh and mechanism unit bucked and slavered. Holding on for grim life, protecting his face from the hammer-blows of a flailing fist, he plunged a hand into the hot, wet chest and got a grip on the mechanical heart. He jerked with all his strength. The robot quivered and was still.

Rex rolled off the body and wiped the sweat from his face. "I've killed four of them that way," he gasped. "You can pound them with color 'til hell freezes over and they keep coming. Damnedest things I ever saw."

There was no response and Rex looked around quickly to find Colleen gone. He got to his feet cursing, stood undecided for a moment and then moved off down the passageway. "They're crazy," he growled. "All women are crazy. I risk my neck to come down here after her, so she runs away in a place she doesn't know anything about."

Then he stopped suddenly and raised his gun. Colleen came from behind a shoulder in the passageway, clad sketchily but adequately in strips of cloth. "I found that robot you'd killed on the way down and made myself a costume."

REX STARED, fascinated not so much by the girl herself as by the amazing change which had been wrought. She was no longer a beaten, cringing thing. She stood with head erect, eyes bright, and a cockiness highlighted her manner. "Lord, you look awful," she observed.

"I've been in five running fights and I fell down three flights of stairs. How do you expect me to look?"

"Here, let me wipe that blood off your face."

Rex stood still while she cleaned away the gore to her satisfaction. "Okay," she said. "Now come on. We've got to get going."

He stared in wonder. "Well, I'll be damned! So you're running the show now, huh? Fine! Go find a way out for yourself. Maybe I'll be seeing you."

He started down the corridor at a rapid pace, but Colleen came pattering along from behind. "No you don't! Leaving a defenseless girl to fend for herself. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Then cut out the act and get in line."

"You won't even allow a girl her self-respect," Colleen pouted.

"Not when she doesn't appear to have much left," Rex said wickedly.

"Why you—"

Colleen flew straight through the air. She hit him like an oversized bumblebee. Her legs went around his waist, her arms around his neck. Her white teeth slashed out and found his ear.

With a curse, Rex jerked her free and held her at arm's length while she kicked and struggled. His face was a whirlpool of surprised rage. But gradually the rage faded to give place to a grin. "You're a hellcat for fair," he said.

"Apologize! Take it back! Take back what you said!"

Getting a quick grip on both her hands, Rex drew her in and kissed her

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savagely. Her eyes, a half-inch from his own, blazed and flamed.

He held her away.

"Take it back! Damn you! Apologize."

"What for?"

"The thing you said!"

"Okay. I'm sorry. You've got a lot of self-respect."

The fires seemed to go out somewhat. Warily, Rex put her down. "Let's cut this out and get back to the others. There's plenty of trouble ahead."

Colleen smiled and held out her hand. "Sorry. Shake?"

He fell for it. She grabbed his hand and, before he could move, her teeth had sunk deeply into the flesh between his thumb and first finger.

He let out a howl as Colleen dropped the hand and danced away. "Now we're even," she called. "Don't be a sorehead. You had it coming."

He caught her in a rush, but merely held her and looked into her face with a terrible intensity. "Cut this out, you little fool! You'll have every robot within a mile of here on our necks. Are you going to behave, or will I have to gag you and carry you over my shoulder?"

A LOOK OF soberness and remembered fear came into her eyes. She nodded mutely. Without a word, Rex put her down and started off along the corridor. After traveling in silence behind him for some time, Colleen came alongside Rex. "Is father all right—and your partner?"

"They were when I left them. We ran into some natives and they took us to a cave. The poor devils are waiting to be killed. I never saw such helpless animals."

Colleen shuddered. "I know what you mean. One of them was killed at my feet, before that monster put his hands on me."

Rex looked over at her with appreciation. "He's going to be pretty sore when he finds you're gone. I imagine he was looking forward to the next meeting."

"I'd—I'd have killed him," Colleen said. "I don't know how, but I'd have found a way. I'd have killed him with my teeth."

"We aren't out of this yet. Before it's over you may get a chance to try."

They walked on in silence for a while. Apparently Rex had killed all the robots in the vicinity, or else they'd fled.

Suddenly Rex stopped and gripped Colleen's shoulder. His fingers hurt, but she did not notice it, did not move. She was held spellbound by the agonized shriek that echoed through the passageway. It died, only to come again, rise and fall as though it were the gauge of pain applied, rereleased, applied.

"Something's gone wrong," Rex said. "Get behind me, but stay close."

The wail of agony arose again as Rex stopped short, having almost run into the broad back of a robot standing guard at the entrance to the Hidden Place. Rex walked carefully backward until they were out of sight around the closet corner. He turned and whispered to Colleen. "We can't dive in 'til we find out what we're facing. There are some open balustrades near the ceiling of the cave. They must give off into corridors above this one. We'll go up and see."

They moved quietly up through the winding passageways, bearing ever toward the left. The sounds of pain from the cave faded for a time and then increased in volume, serving as a guide to the two Terrans. After a few minutes of search, they found the open balustrades, entered one of them and crawled forward on hands and knees.

For a long moment, they drank in the sight. Then Colleen gasped. She

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covered her eyes with her hands and turned to bury her face in Rex' chest. "Awful—awful!" she whispered.

Rex' teeth were clenched. The muscles of his jaws were tight. "The dirty, rotten, filthy swine."

BELOW THEM, the floor of the cave was strewn with hacked and mangled bodies. The Lurdans had been massacred; men, women, and children lay strewn about in various contortions and grimaces of the last agony.

Along one side of the room a line of the half-human robots stood stolidly at attention. Against one wall lay Johnny Calhoun and Saul Barnum, bound hand and foot. So far as Rex could see, they hadn't been too badly handled.

But the highlight of the tableau was centered in an open space in the center of the hall. There, the Lurdan, Morkon, was stretched writhing on the stone floor. He was not dead, but death would have been a welcome release. He had been beaten almost beyond recognition. He was a mass of blood, having been slashed and torn by the whip in the hand of a robot who stood over him.

Also, there was another person in the cave. Nearby, perfectly groomed, disdainful, even a trifle amused by the proceedings, stood Brother William. He stepped forward and looked down at Morkon with obvious distaste. "You obstinate fool," he said softly. "Why do you make it so hard for yourself? You have only to tell me where you hid the bullion from the Lurdan Treasury and your sufferings will be ended. And don't think death will cheat me of the information either. You are far from dead. This can go on for hours. You'll tell eventually. We have far more delicate tortures than we've yet used."

"The beast!" Colleen whispered. "He must enjoy seeing people tortured. Otherwise he'd use a serum on the poor man. It's easy to open a person's mouth with a hypodermic needle."

"In this case it might not work. These Lurdans may be stronger than we realize. They're pretty highly developed and they may have strong mind blocks that the strongest drugs can't dissolve."

"Can't we do something? Can't we put the poor devil out of his misery?"

Rex didn't answer because at that moment Brother William cursed and leaped forward. He went to his knees beside Morkon and jerked the latter's head around. Then his curses were renewed as he hurled the head to the floor.

"Dead. The weak fool! We must have miscalculated his capacity for punishment!" He turned in rage on the whipping robot. "You stupid mechanism! You used too much strength!"

The robot quivered peculiarly as though the vibrations of Brother William's rage had disturbed its delicate mental balance.

"I'm going to try something," Rex said. "Let's hope it works."

COLLEEN watched as he set the dial of his color-gun; saw a mirthless grin spread over his face. "The boys are going to think a hive of bees dropped on them," he said.

Rex was no doubt referring to Johnny and Saul, because it was there that his attention was riveted. He aimed the gun carefully, using his left wrist as a rest. He pressed the trigger. A fine line of green flame shot down from the balustrade and bounced sparks off the floor beside Johnny. Then he moved an inch to the right, squarely hitting the rope strands around Johnny's wrists.

The spaceman let out a yelp and Rex' grin deepened. "It's like touching a hot stove," he said, "but look! I got the ropes. His hands are

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loose."

Now Rex swiftly re-dialed his gun—and lined his sights on Brother William. But the freebooter was amazingly quick of both mind and body. Having located Rex by the first green ray, he dived headlong to his left; hit the floor, rolled at a sharp angle, came to his feet and got the angle of the wall between himself and the gun before the lethal rays found him.

Rex swore under his breath and yelled at Johnny and Saul. "Get the hell up here before he sets the robots on you!"

Neither man waited to sat goodbye. They dashed past the robots and reached the door even as Brother William, now out of harm's way, sent a mental command to his terrible corps. The Terrans got out of the carnal hall just as rock-shuddering blasts from the robot's guns crumbled the rock around the exits.

A few moments later Johnny and Saul came pounding up the ramplike corridors. "Come on," Rex yelled, "let's keep going! We've got to get back to the space field before those robots cut us off."

"You know the way?" Johnny asked.

"The same way we came here in the first place."

"Which way is that?"

"Shut up and follow me."

They ran in single file, Saul Barnum calling out: "You all right, honey? I was sure worried about you."

"Yeah," Rex growled. "You worried yourself sick. A hell of a guy you are."

"Leave my father alone," Colleen snapped.

"Shut up and run."

SOON THEY were in corridors that even Johnny recognized. "This is it. The door that leads out onto the field."

"Stand back." Rex opened the door until there was room for one eye. He peered out. "Things look clear. He evidently didn't expect us to get here so quick. Get set, all of you. We're going to make a break for it. Colleen, you and Saul go first. It'll be easier for Johnny and me to cover you from behind."

"I ain't got a gun," Johnny complained.

Rex glowered at his partner. "You do all right. Let them tie you up and take your gun away from you. Well I'll have to furnish the fire power."

Saul Barnum had a mouthful of tobacco he'd been working on industriously. He spat out a flood of juice, and then reached down his pants leg and came up with an ancient ray gun that had seen better days.

Johnny snatched the gun from his hands and Saul made no objection.

"Okay," Rex said. "Break straight for the ramp, you two."

Saul and Colleen dashed hand in hand from the doorway. Rex and Johnny came hard behind to fan out expertly on either side, so that the father and daughter were flanked on either side. Johnny saw the first moving object—a figure that stepped from a toolshed door on the far side of the field and raised a gun. Johnny fired the old ray thrower and there was a sound like frying bacon. The ray didn't quite carry. It fell some five feet in front of the figure and put a large jagged hole in the metal flooring. But it drove the man to cover.

"Get the lead out!" Rex yelled, and sent a stream of purple toward two men who appeared far to the left. The purple seared them instantly. They turned into unidentifiable purple heaps under the hammering of four thousand tons to the square inch.

"Those ain't robots!" Johnny observed. They're Brothers! Give 'em hell!"

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But the Brothers were reluctant to face the cross fire from the field, and the four reached the ramp of the *Dog Star* without mishap. They charged up the ramp and Rex slammed the port on any possibility of ray-fire from without.

They staggered into the reception lounge panting for breath. Nothing was said for a time. Then a voice came from outside the ship, over a loud-speaker: "Terrans in the *Dog Star*. This is Brother William. You've played the fools, you know. You can't possibly blast off with that other ship on the ways ahead of you. Up to now I had a certain respect for your ability as fighting men. That is gone now. We will exterminate you at our leisure."

"Good lord, Rex," Johnny groaned. "He's right! We got into the wrong ship. We're dead ducks."

Rex Moran seemed worn; far more tired than even the violence of the last few hours justified. "No, we didn't get into the wrong ship. Let's go to the pilot's cabin. I want to have a few words with that joker."

THE THREE of them followed Rex up the companionway. There he picked up a speaker and snapped the switch. "You out there—Brother William! What have you got against us? Why won't you allow us to blast off and go about our business?"

There was a quiet laugh. "You're most naive. And a trifle yellow. My estimation of you continues to fall."

"Then you plan to starve us out or kill us in some other way?"

"We have our plans. You won't live long."

"Then maybe you'll satisfy my curiosity. How is this planet guided and moved through space?"

"There are nine jets situated at strategic points on the globe. They are controlled from an engine room not far from here."

"I see. And what sort of an envelope are you riding in?"

"Something your Terran scientists never dreamed of. A controllable gas that recognizes gravity and can be left in space as a cloud when we are through with it. After a certain elapsed time, it disintegrates."

"Clever." Rex had appeared to be under great pressure. As the mocking words came into the pilot's cabin, however, he seemed to relax. Now he grinned, even winked at Colleen. "How many of you are there?"

"I think you're getting too inquisitive," the voice came back coldly.

"Sorry. . . ."

Colleen came close and whispered something in Rex' ear. The latter's eyes widened. He picked up the microphone again. "Is it true you have designs against Terra?"

"Oh—you've been talking to the girl? Yes, it's quite true. We need your planet. It will fit perfectly into our next transaction."

"You might get a surprise if you try to take it."

"If the Terrans were warned—yes. But they won't be. Before they know what happened, it will all be over and we'll be hunting down the last few in the hills."

"The dirty rats," Johnny groaned. Then to Rex: "And you got us trapped here in this shell where we die like bugs in a cup. I can't figure you, Rex. This isn't like you. You're the kind of guy who'd stay out and fight to the last for a chance. You knew this was a death trap. You came in here on purpose."

REX STARED vaguely at his partner for a minute. "Anybody know how many of these big Brothers are aboard this planet?"

Saul Barnum spoke up. "Those big-

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footed critters said about two thousand."

"Hmmm. I'd figured about fifteen hundred on a job this size. But two thousand isn't much better." He turned his attention to the glum Johnny. "Son—do you really want to get rich—the easy way?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"I don't get you, Rex. You look like you just bit into a big red apple and found a worm."

"I asked you a question."

"Well—hell! I don't know why you're so damned interested all of a sudden, but to tell the truth I never cared much for the deal. I just went along to stick with you."

Rex grinned. His sigh was one of relief. "You know, that's about the only reason I did it."

"What are you two guys talking about?" Saul Barnum inquired plaintively.

"Our cargo."

"What are you carrying?"

Rex stared levelly at him for a dead thirty seconds. "Morostans for Terra," he said.

Saul jerked to his feet. A look of surprise and contempt played over his face. Colleen drew back as from something unclean. "Flesh runners!"

"Yes. Flesh runners. But I don't think I ever looked at it the way other people do. The Morostans are good people trapped on a dying planet—shunned and ignored. Who can blame them for wanting to save themselves and their families? Who can blame them for wanting to keep on living?"

"They pay a pretty big piece of change per head to get dropped off in the Terran hills too," Saul said drily.

"Sure they do, and I wanted the money. I'm not trying to make myself out a saint."

"Look," Johnny cut in, "why all this lofty chatter? This isn't the time for it. Or are you trying to get right with God before we get knocked off by those damn Brothers?"

REX' JAW tightened. "I'm trying to get up the guts to finish something I started when I pointed us toward this ship." He got to his feet. "Stay here. I'm going back and talk to our cargo."

Twenty minutes later Rex returned, followed by two huge, hairy Morostans. They were charged with wonder at being allowed access to this portion of the ship. Their clear hazel eyes took in the other Terrans, but they remained silent.

"These are the leaders of the group," Rex said. "They tell me they'd be honored to bleed and die for a planet of their own. I wonder if there are many Terrans who would say the same under identical circumstances."

One of the Morostans said quietly, "We would fight and die for a home for our people."

"You understand you only have about nine hundred able-bodied men among you; that you have women and children to think of. There are two thousand of these Brothers, the men who stole the planet originally. Can you handle them?"

"We will fight."

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"I can give you enough arms for one shock assault. Some small bombs and three cases of color-guns I have aboard."

Gratitude, like the rising sun, shone in the faces of the Morostans. "You mean you will also give us arms?"

"You couldn't fight the Brothers with your bare hands."

"We would be willing to try."

Rex grinned. "I'll break the guns out of the lockers. Then we will plan a campaign. A way to get you a beach head on the planet. If you win through, consider this world a legacy from another fine race, who were not alert enough to hold it and take a lesson from that truth. You will find it has controls here, and if you win the fight you can roll it back to Morostan and take the rest of your people off that dying rock pile. This is a good planet. You can live and prosper here."

The Morostan held forth a folded paper. "Here is the money for our trip. I will pay you now. It is a draft on Banco Marsiana for one million credits."

Rex reddened. "Keep it," he said gruffly. "I didn't fulfill my end of the bargain. You'll need the capital to get started here. Come on. I'll get you the guns."

AN HOUR later, seven hundred Morostans thundered out of the *Dog Star* into the faces of whatever surprised Brothers were in the hangars and tool sheds around the port. The Brothers rallied quickly, and there was war and carnage around the field before the signal came and the ports opened again to allow the women and children egress to a prepared fort under a guard of two hundred Morostans armed to the teeth.

A little while later, the outside speaker blared forth. "To Rex Moran in the *Dog Star*. Bridgehead established. All clear to blast off when you're ready. Would advise speed. This war isn't over yet."

Johnny glanced at Rex and grabbed the microphone. "Could you use a couple of hands? We haven't fought a war for a long time."

"Thanks. We'd be honored, but we'd rather do it alone. It's a personal matter."

Rex turned to Saul and Colleen. There was a fixed grin on his face. "Pretty smart, eh? Letting somebody else fight our battles—get us out of a tough spot while we sit here on our fannies. Pretty clever."

Colleen's eyes were wet. "You big lug. Who do you think you're kidding? Get going, Dad. We haven't got all day." She walked into Rex' arms and put her face up to be kissed. "I'll see you later, tough guy!"

Rex' grin was freer now—not so fixed. "On Terra, baby. I'll buy you a dinner. Johnny and I will probably stop off on Mars for a cargo of ore, but we'll be along."

"And you can just about buy one dinner with what we'll make," Johnny grunted.

"What do you care? Who wants to get rich?"

Rex said, "So long, Saul. Hit that stasis hard and you'll roll right through, I hope."

"I hope so, too," Saul said. "And—"

"And what?"

"Don't worry about anything. There won't be any loose talking so far as I'm concerned about riding the green lane."

"Thanks."

A few moments later, Colleen had a complaint. "Will you get going, you two? Out of sight somewhere? When a girl kisses a man goodbye, she doesn't want the relatives and friends hanging around."

THE END

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ELECTRICITY IN CAPSULE FORM

ADVANCES in science are all made by Nobel Prize winners. More important in many respects are the tens of thousands of relatively unknown inventors who pop up with amazing ideas each year, and whose efforts influence our way of life more than we suspect. A perfect example of this is the invention of a man named Rowe—a miniature electric motor at whose ultimate influence we can only guess.

You've seen this miniature electric motor in a hundred thousand different toys. Little automobiles which run and back up at the touch of a button, little railroad engines which maneuver powerfully at the flick of a switch. This year such toys have become commonplace, simply because an inventor has designed a small, cheap, easily constructed, and effectual electric motor no bigger than a couple of thumbs!

The motor is rated at a feeble .7 of a ten-thousandth of a horsepower at a speed of 7 thousand RPM.

But toys aren't the real end point of the idea. They're just a starter, a way of introduction. Already guided-missile engineers, meteorologists and others who have been looking for a light, cheap, compact, fairly powerful, expendable electric motor have evinced interest in this new "toy".

The use of a tiny electric motor can mean innumerable modifications for familiar appliances. It can mean, for instance, cheap electric window-openers for homes and cars. You name it—anywhere that muscle is used, the motor can substitute, if it can be made cheaply enough. Rowe's invention some day is going to mean that the so-called "push-button" age will really be with us!

By Walt Crain

DICK TRACY PREDICTS

DICK TRACY'S done it again! He's really called the ball this time. The wrist radio that he's been using for years is now a possibility.

What will make this an actuality is a transistor—a tiny electrical device—which has been developed by RCA. This device is more durable than the present-day radio tube, seems to have greater versatility, and uses much less electricity.

It probably won't be long before the vest-pocket radio, or the wrist radio, will be in popular use, to compete with the table model at home.

By. L. A. Burt

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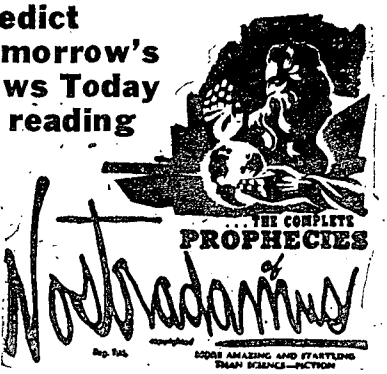

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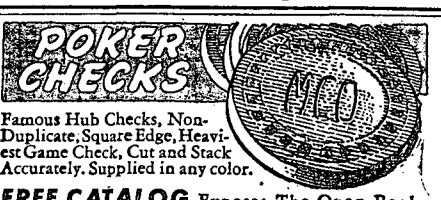

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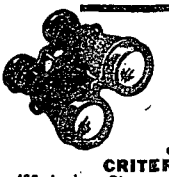

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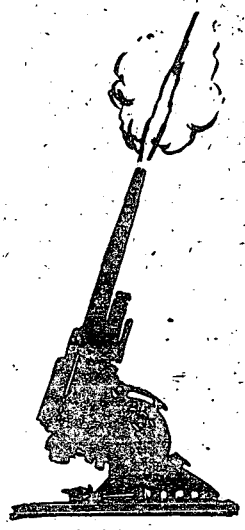
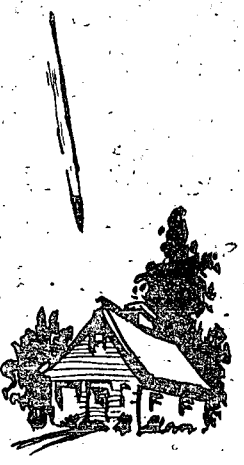
THE MYSTERY OF THOUGHT

By FREDERICK BOOTH



MODERN physics is filled with awe-inspiring—and yet captivating—ideas. Nor are these ideas limited to the scientists themselves. See how rapidly relativity and quantum theory came into the public consciousness! Interested people can't deflect their imaginations from the fascinating ideas that physics presents. Many efforts have been made to extend these ideas of physics into the commonplaces of everyday thought. For the most part, this has been a failure, but there is current an ingenious—and potentially great—application of physical theory to thinking. It makes use of the famous principle expounded by Heisenberg—the "uncertainty principle".



The principle of uncertainty states that it is impossible to know atomic and subatomic phenomena beyond a certain limited position. That is, we can know atomic and subatomic reactions to within only a definite, limited degree. It is as though a shadowy wall had been erected in the atomic world. You can measure the speed of an electron, for example, as so many kilometers per second. You may know this quite exactly. But then you can't determine the precise position of that electron! Or you may know the exact position of the electron, but you can't know its exact speed! That conflicting set of data is inherent in any physical measurement, but we notice it most in the atomic and subatomic worlds. Again, you can't measure the speed of an electron, because in order to locate it you've got to hit it with a photon of light—and when you do that, you disturb its position and velocity. Essentially the principle of uncertainty in physics says that you can't know exactly what you're measuring because the very act of measuring changes the situation!

That wonderful idea has been extended, by recent thought-provoking investigations, into the philosophical and psychological world.

Nothing is more difficult to understand than the nature of thought and of thinking. And the reason for that, says one prominent modern philosopher, is that, just as in physics, so here, the principle of uncertainty applies. When you try to narrow down a thought, when you try to investigate the thinking process—which you do with thoughts and with thinking—you disturb the very thing you are trying to understand!

The thought-principle which is thus examined is being subjected to a bombardment of other thoughts, much as if one were trying to lift oneself by the bootstraps. It just doesn't work. You could find out the shape of a house by touch alone, but you couldn't find out its shape if your touching-tool were not a hand but, say, a six-inch gun. In the process of "touching" the house with six-inch shells, you'd destroy it. By exact analogy, by investigating thoughts with thoughts and thinking, you destroy the original thought. Again it is as though nature has erected a barrier to understanding the nature of thought, just as it has to investigation of subatomics.

True, this is speculative, but it is so reasonable and the analogy seems to follow through so successfully, that there is little doubt that that is the true nature of the problem. In spite of all the calculating-machine anologies, in spite of any success in creating robotic brains, the basic problem of what thinking really is, will not be solved!

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HIS SATANIC MERCURY

By A. T. KEDZIE

MERCURY IS Hell!—that little sphere of crumpled rock so near to the gigantic disk of the Sun most nearly duplicates the traditional ideas of a hell. Recently, thermocouple observations with sensitive instrumentation have shown Mercury to be even hotter than was initially believed—the sunward side is at four hundred degrees Centigrade, more than hot enough to melt lead. Since Mercury does not rotate on its axis, the cold outer side is in equilibrium with its spatial surroundings and all it does is pour off heat into space, so it is close to absolute zero, getting no more heat from the rest of the planet except that which can be conducted by the almost non-conducting rocks and pumice that comprise its surface.

Mercury ranges from about twenty-eight to forty-three million miles from the Sun and thus receives something like seven times as much heat as the Earth does. Is it any wonder then that this little planet is little more than a piece of firebrick in a celestial furnace?

There is considerable interest in Mercury as an ultimate visiting point for a rocket when the day comes that rocketry is a firmly established art. There is no hope of finding life there of course (although we could be surprised, Nature being what it is) but there are two services the planet could perform. It would make a perfect observational station for detecting the nature of sunspots, for one thing. Secondly, its mineral constituents are likely to prove interesting.

This much is known about such a proposed trip, however; it will not be made as long as men have to rely on chemical rockets—it just can't be done. Going so near the Sun is easy—you simply take advantage of its enormous gravity. But when you want to get away again you must fight that gravity—you must do work against the incredible gravitational field of the Sun. That's not easy to do if you have to be squeamish about fuel. Therefore, fuel must not count—an atomic rocket is the only safe way.

It is possible that one trip to this little planet may be enough. Perhaps even after men have roamed all through the Solar System, they will not find need to establish themselves on Mercury. It has been useful up to now only as a time-checking point for observing transits across the disk of the Sun—maybe it will remain that way, sort of a monument to Nature's profligacy with planets. But certainly intrepid explorers are going to make the journey once!

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WHEN GADGETRY GAINS GLORY

By WILTON AVERY MACDONALD

THE MIRACLES popping from the cathode ray tube come at such a rate that it's almost impossible to believe that they can happen so fast. But they do. Television, of course, is the major development, but even this black-and-white miracle seems dated in view of the fact that color is already on the way. Now, straight color television is about to get its come-uppance. The latest thing is "stereo-television", or three-dimensional television.

For a long time, the movies have striven to create the third dimension, which would give breadth and reality and depth to the flat images on the screen. Save for certain experimental attempts under the auspices of strong scientific work and extremely complicated set-ups of equipment, stereo-movies haven't been much of a success.

An inventor today, however, has assigned the television industry a magnificent contribution, which may see widespread use in a surprisingly short time in light of the fact that his invention has the major asset of all great inventions—simplicity. He uses a single tube, a miraculous tube which not only produces the image in color, but also gives it the much vaunted stereo effect. This is done with the single complication of three cameras on the televising end, and no complications on the receiving end. It depends upon a very complex tube whose face is banded with color emitting fluorescent materials. The electronic details are undisclosed.

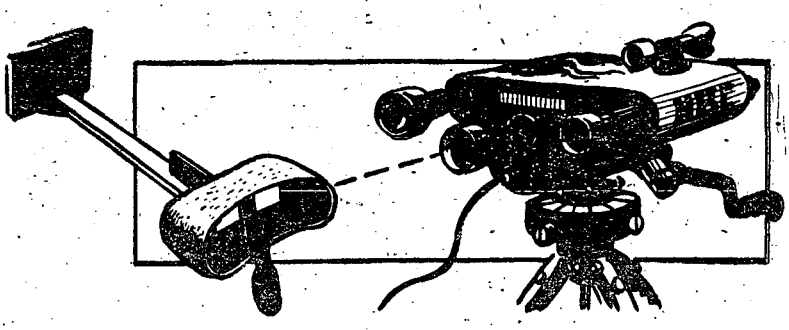
For a person sitting on the sidelines watching these astounding kaleidoscopic advancements in modern invention, particularly in the field of electronics, it is hard to believe that the developments can continue to proceed at this fantastic rate. Are there no limitations to the art of scientific and applied progress?

To this rhetorical question can be given the answer "yes"—there are limitations, but they are so broad that we shall never see the end, in our lifetimes at least. Everything the science-fiction writers have prognosticated seems to have the possibility of success, given time enough and assuming there is some attempt to adhere to the basic tenets of science.

Actually, we are at the beginning of an age so golden that we cannot imagine one-tenth of its riches. This presumes, of course, that Man won't destroy himself with the terrible "hell-bomb". Surely, there must be enough sanity left in this world to prevent that.

Even as far back as a hundred years ago men were disclaiming the lack of opportunity and commenting on the fact that the only further advancements in scientific progress would be in the decimal point. We know how wrong they were! If anything, there is infinitely more opportunity now than there ever was before.

Stereo-color television may be regarded by some as a trivial example of real scientific progress, but when it is realized what a chain and wealth of discovery and invention by a multitude of human beings exists behind it, than some measure of the might of the laboratory can be gleaned. You can't sell science short, even though there are some who say we are becoming obsessed with gadgetry. If living in this present world with its marvels like stereo TV is gadgetry—we're all for more of it!



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TAPE MEASURE TO THE MOON

By FAYE BESLOW

THE SIZE of the Earth can be measured in many ways. And just about as many different answers pop up. This is of course because the Earth is far from a perfect sphere. Rapid rotation has turned it into a prolate spheroid, bulging at the equator, flattening at the Poles. Still a knowledge of the exact dimensions of the planet is necessary for many scientific purposes.

The most recent technique of measuring the Earth puts the yardstick on the Moon! Stars can be occulted very sharply by the edge of the Moon because of its lack of atmosphere. Astronomers stationed at different spots on the Earth observe simultaneously this sharp cutting off of the stellar images and by a neat computation deduce the precise curvature of the Earth between their positions. Extension gives them the size of the planet.

FIND YOUR PRIME

By PETE BOGGS

IN MATHEMATICS, particularly in the branch known as "the theory of numbers", one of the outstanding problems is the computation of prime numbers. Prime numbers are those which can be divided evenly only by one and by themselves. It is easy to compute the first dozen or so prime numbers without any trouble at all, as you can verify them with a pencil and paper. But what happens when the numbers start to get big? And how big can prime numbers get? Are there laws governing them?

Before the electronic computers, a Frenchman, using a hand computer, calculated that the following number was prime: 2 to the 148th power plus 1, quantity divided by 17. Wheeler and Miller, using an electronic computer, determined that a larger number was prime: 2 to the 127th power, quantity minus 1, whole quantity squared, results plus-1. That, so far as is known, is the largest prime number computed. And it is large!

Mathematicians have been trying for centuries to determine the laws, if any, governing prime numbers, without succeeding. Philosophers and mathematicians suspect that number theory lies at the foundation of all mathematics and science and that, ultimately, it is in this field that the answers to the basic concepts of nature will be found.

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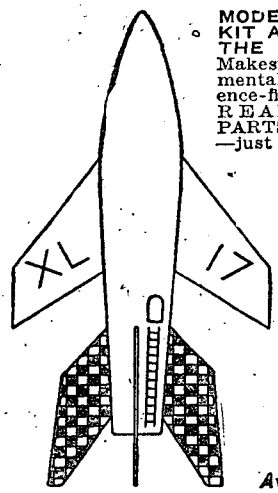

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READER'S PAGE

Dear LES:

Is that beautiful girl in the April MEN BEHIND FANTASTIC ADVENTURES really you? Seems to me that with looks like that you could really make authors and artists turn out good work.

Just out of curiosity, I'd like to know why you used the same MEN BEHIND for both mags.

Strange as it may seem, I'm not as overjoyed as I might like to be about the announcement of the new FANTASTIC. There are quite a few mags on the market nowadays. Maybe a little too many. However, if you'll keep out the stf stories and print only fantasy, I'll be very happy. I want another UNKNOWN. You could put the good stf into AS. That magazine needs a good shot in the arm right now.

The reason for writing this, though, was reminded by the letter column in the April issue. A year and a half ago, when I first started reading stf, I enjoyed all the rating-for-the-year letters in the column so much that I determined, come 1952, I would rate the year's batch too. So here's my 1951 rating, even though a bit late:

(1) "Medusa Was a Lady"—It's hard to say why I put this first—maybe the smooth writing. I liked it, though, pure fantasy, and I want that in FA.

(2) "The Justice of Tor"—when this ushered in 1951, I thought that perhaps FA had hit a year equal to 1949 but, as it turned out, she hadn't. This was good, although it did take a little of the enchantment of "The Face Beyond The Veil" for me. But then, that was what it was supposed to do.

(3) "The Dead Don't Die"—I just plain liked it. I think you could stand a few more weird ones. You rarely print good ones any more, and those you do are shorts.

(4) "Whom the Gods Would Slay"—everybody seemed to like this. I thought it was fair, and maybe a little thin in spots for a full-length novelet (where I come from 35,000 words ain't a novel).

(5) "The Sword of Ra"—I got a feeling this should have been rated higher. Bobby Pope ain't gonna like me for this—he's got enough reason to hate me as it is.

(6) "The Man Who Stopped at Nothing"—this was slickly written and it was fantasy, but I didn't like it as much as the rest.

(7) "The Terrible Puppets"—the best thing about this was the little Tarmuts. These were superbly characterized.

(8) "Invasion from the Deep"—no comment, except that it seemed Shaverish, and that ain't good.

(9) "Secret of the Flaming Ring"—who was that that made the point about "Shot Mahoy"? That was a good name.

(10) "Jongor Fights Back"—you'd think Robert Moore Williams would have improved over the years, but instead he backslid. He used to write some pretty good ones.

(11) "Excalibur and the Atom"—I never would have suspected this from Sturgeon. The same Sturgeon that wrote "The Dreaming Jewels"? I am saddened by the remembrance of this novelette. It splotches up Mr. Sturgeon's career. I'm probably alone, though. I had a friend who wrote that he thought it was good for FA.

(12) "Nine Worlds West"—its rating speaks for its merit.

The covers were pretty good as a whole. You might try Jones again. He ought to be better after his rest. The best cover of the year was Walter Hinton's "Whom the Gods Would Slay." The second best was tied—Jones for "The Justice of Tor" and Valigursky for "The Man Who Stopped at Nothing." The worst lead novelette "Nine Worlds West."

Other excellent stories were:

"In What Dark Mind," "Dark Benediction," "Alias Adam," "The Eye of Tandyla," "As Others See Us," "Make Room For Me," and "The Traveling Crag."

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Back to the recent letter section: Sylvia Tzinberg attacks Lovecraft. I attack Sylvia Tzinberg. I like Lovecraft. His plots—if they can be called that—are not worth mentioning, I admit. That is, some of his plots. He always has men terrified, killed, driven insane, committing suicide, and otherwise hurting themselves, all because they saw the most horrible monster in the world.

One or two stories of his, I realize, do go overboard but, believe it or not, every one of Lovecraft's stories (with one pos-

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sible exception) are part of a complete modern mythos.

Series by the billions, futuristic histories, all very believable, but where can you find a complete mythos with the most fantastic creations and terrors that are believable and run almost directly with the events happening? Nowhere—except in Lovecraft. He made his monsters so hellishly believable that not a few people went all over the world hunting for the *Necronmicon* of the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred. Even ASTOUNDING, which Hap Kliban finds so complicated, printed two of his very finest tales.

Besides Poe, Lovecraft is the only American fantasy writer to ever really write *liberature*.

Also, Sylvia says that Lovecraft wrote about sexual orgies. If you want the clean, decent literature that people are always harping about, then read Lovecraft. He is as sexless as a cyclotron. Maybe Sylvia doesn't like weird stories—then how can she like "Rest in Agony"? Hasn't she ever ridden on the ferris wheel, or any of the multitude of other devices at the carnival? Is it because she doesn't *like* to be scared? Most people do.

If you ever get in the mood, you will never be more thoroughly scared than by reading what I think is the best of Lovecraft's stories (weird stories, I mean—stuff like "The Silver Key" I think is his best, but it is not weird), "The Shadow over Innsmouth."

Although I don't care about the story rating—I just wanted you to see the kind one fan likes—I would appreciate it if you printed the defense of Lovecraft. This gal doesn't know what she's missing!

Fred Chappell
Box 182
Canto, North Carolina

Shake hands, and when the bell rings come out fighting. ..... Ed.

THE HORSE IS NO SOURCE

Dear LES:

Well, here I am, after being told off by fifty different stfans. I've got this to say:

Barry Prag: I am not a BEM. Stf is not trash, it is enjoyable reading material.

Add to my list of pen names: H. B. Hickey, E. K. Jarvis, and S. M. Tenneshaw.

Captain Video has been changed. Instead of chasing Permees Lighthouse he fights someone different. You can't tell me that a story in which a man invents a machine to bring a man back to life, and then breaks the machine for security reasons, is not Space Opera with a capital S. Buck Rogers is gone. I'm not crying.

D. A. Sodek: What do you mean I got my inside information direct from the horse's mouth? I wouldn't call my source a horse.

Arline Gingold: Why no more letters?

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In April FA you sure defined Jorgensen with vivid adjectives. AS has the highest sales (so says Ray Palmer in OW). "Five Years in the Marmalade" was Geoff St. Reynard at his best.

Bill Vissaris: If you can see a bubble in an endless ocean of nothing, you're pretty good.

Pen Name Department: Chet Geier—Geier Chet—Guy Archette. Captain Video. It is no more Space Opera; it is excellent. Imagine when, to my surprise, I find it is written by Milt Lesser.

To my mind a good story must have plot, action, characterization. A story that is all plot with nothing else is space opera. A story with a good plot and a bit of variation is a story you'd find in one of the lesser mags. A simple plot with a lot of five-dollar words is for ASTOUNDING. A story with the three ingredients I mention above is for AS and FA.

Why, oh why, did you have to put Leo Summers on the cover? Lawrence is much better. I know now L. Sterne Stevens is Lawrence. Their shading is too much alike.

THE TOP TEN STORIES OF FIFTY-ONE:

(10) On to the top ten comes a writer who first appeared in January '51 AMAZING. One year later he hits with "Reluctant Traitor"—Walter Miller

(9) Robert Arnette—"Beyond the Rings of Saturn". If this be space opera, let us make the most of it

(8) Gerald Vance—"The Laughter of Shiru"

(7) Milt (Stephen Marlowe) Lesser—"40 Days Hath September"

(6) Rog Phillips—"Flaming Ring"

(5) Edward Benson—"A World He Never Made"

(4) S. M. Tenneshaw—"Beyond the Walls of Space"

(3) Lawrence Chandler—"Planet of No Return"

(2) Gerald Vance—"We the Machine"

(1) Here it is, the top piece of writing, Milton Lesser and the story of a man who didn't let an infinite number of worlds stand between him and his love, a man who thought, "Somewhere I'll Find You".

NEW MAGAZINE DEPARTMENT:

Well, someone had to do it. The new leader of the stfmag field is FANTASTIC. It far outshines ASF, AS, FA, OW, MADGE, IF or any other mag.

RATINGS—FANTASTIC:

(1) "Six and Ten Are Johnny"
(2) "For Heaven's Sake"
(3) "Full Circle"
(4) "And Three To Get Ready"
(5) "Some Day They'll Give Us Guns"
(6) "The Smile"
(7) "What If"
(8) "The Opal Necklace"

Well if the next FANTASTIC is as good as the last one, you better put it out

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monthly or bi-monthly.

Name Withheld
Highland Park
New Jersey

The response to the new FANTASTIC was overwhelming. Tentative plans indicate we may be going bi-monthly in the near future. .....Ed.

WHERE'S HIS ONE AND ONLY?

Dear Ed:

What happened to those great covers by the one and only Robert Gibson Jones?

Maybe this question is a little foolish. Maybe I've been in a coffin and don't know what happened or what went off. But nevertheless I wish you would answer me in FA.

As it happened, I was looking through my budding collection of AS and FA when I came upon a masterpiece of a cover illo. Yep! You guessed it! It was done by Mr. Jones. To my happy surprise, the Jones covers continued for some while, then—no more. As I said, what happened?

My collection is somewhat ragged with mags that have months between them, so I might have missed out on an item that explained the absence of Mr. Jones.

Another question, is, what happened to those beeeoootiful 178 pages you once had? I'm not satisfied with your answer of "not enough paper".

Maurice Lemus
664 Fourth Avenue
San Francisco 18, California

We're unable to tell at this point just how soon we'll be able to schedule another Robert Gibson Jones cover. .....Ed.

HOW DARE *YOU*, SIR?

Dear Ed:

My subject of writing is your April ish. All in all, it was a good one; only, what are you trying to do—win first prize for thinness? Why, I remember the times when FA was...well, I won't go into that!

Now, I wish to give my "learned" (I've been reading stf for five years) criticism of the stories in ye olde April ish:

"The Jack of Planets"—Fairman. Paul Fairman is one of my favorites, and this story is one of his best. A bit short for a novel, it was, however, *very* good. (Nice twist at the end, too.)

"The Unfinished Equation"—Arnette. This is one of those "things-aren't-what-they-seem" fiascos which are getting just a bit too frequent in the pro-mags.

"The Chase"—Jarvis. A good plot but, except for an interplanetary setting, *not* stf.

"The Green Cat"—Deegan. Hmmmm... no comment.

"A More Potent Weapon"—Phillips.

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Cover—good!

Interior illos—all good except the one for "A More Potent Weapon".

Wha' hoppen to Finlay?

This new mag, FANTASTIC, that you're putting out—you mean to say it's coming out *quarterly?* How dare you, sir! It should be at least a bi-monthly mag!

I hope you will print this, because I want to get in contact with some British fans of about 17 years of age, or thereabouts. How about it, fellas?

Ray Thompson
410 South Fourth Streeet
Norfolk, Nebraska

CALLING ALL AMERICANS!

Dear Editor:

Calling all American Science Fiction and Fantasy readers stationed in England at the U.S.A.A.F. Base, Burton Wood, Lancs.! Hope you are receiving me! The LIVERPOOL SCIENCE FICTION SOCIETY, 'The Space Dive', 13A, St. Vincent Street (back of Lime Street Station), Liverpool, England, would like to see you some Monday night round about 7 p.m. Don't wait for an individual invitation—just pop around and see us as soon as you can. If you haven't got a science-fiction club on the camp and you are feeling out of touch with the stf world—well, this is your chance to get back into it.

Sorry we haven't had the time to get in touch with you before now, but we've been busy getting the 'Space Dive' fixed up. We are only a recently-formed club. We have been doing a display in connection with the stf film "The Day the Earth Stood Still", which has recently been showing in Liverpool.

So roll up, you'll be made very welcome and you'll be able to see a bunch of English fans on their home ground doing their best to spread an interest in stf among the masses.

Any Merseyside readers are also cordially invited to come along whenever the mood strikes them.

David S. Gardner
63, Island Road
Liverpool 19, Lancs., England

Well, you cloud-hoppers, drop in and find out how the English stf clubs are organized. Should be fun.

Ed.

ANYBODY GOT A BACK ISSUE?

Dear Ed:

I am very anxious to obtain a September 1947 issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. If you don't have this issue, would it be possible for you to refer me to someone who may?

Nelle Donnelly
Daytona Beach
Florida

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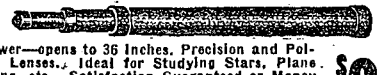

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(*Continued from second cover*)
City with my second wife and three children.

Enough of personal statistics. What about science fiction? I don't think it's just another reading fad. There's every indication that it's here to stay. It's entirely possible that we're seeing the development of a literary field as solid and lasting as the detective, western or love fields. It can be classed as difficult stuff to write, because it is not as clear-cut as the fields just mentioned. It is in reality a background against which stories of fundamental structure are placed. I believe new and striving writers can safely direct full-time effort into this field. Markets are expanding every day, and courses in science-fiction writing have been opened in leading colleges. I fully believe that over the next five years names unpublished today will stand with those of Heinlein, Bradbury, Asimov, and other leading stf authors, and reign as high in the field. Even today, potential classics are showing up in science-fiction editorial offices from entirely unknown writers. As to the method of becoming a successful science-fiction writer, I believe the answer lies in reading. Certain fundamentals can be learned, but one must have the basic ability to write saleable fiction.

The science-fiction field is unique in one respect: the host of fan clubs that have grown up around it. These, I believe, help the writer a great deal, in that he has a continual check on the quality of his work in the letter columns of the magazines. This is something writers in every other branch of fiction would give a great deal to have. As an example, very few detective-story writers ever hear what the individual readers think of their work.

I think as a foundation every aspiring writer should read the early classics of science fiction, not so much from the standpoint of writing as the old masters wrote, but rather to achieve an understanding of what has been done in the field and how the quality has not necessarily improved, but become more modern and complex. In order to break into print, a far better story is necessary today than twenty, ten, or even five years ago, but also the rewards are immeasurably greater.

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